

**PERFORMING RELIGION: VISUAL PUBLICS AND  
CHRISTIANITY IN KERALA**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN  
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

**BY  
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UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD**

**MARCH 2018**

# **Performing Religion: Visual Publics and Christianity in Kerala**

*A thesis submitted to the University of Hyderabad  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**IN**  
**COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

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**March 2018**

*To My Mother*

*Mercy*



## **CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Performing Religion: Visual Publics and Christianity in Kerala,**” submitted by Ambili Anna Markose bearing registration number 09HCPH04 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature, School of Humanities is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

This thesis is free from plagiarism and has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

Parts of this thesis have been:

A. Published in the following publications:

1. “Engendering Minority: Malabar and Migrant Christian in Discourse.” *Alternative Voices: (Re)searching Language, Culture, Identity* [ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4716-2], (2013): 186-197.
2. “Religion, Modernity, and the Nation: Postscripts of Malabar Migration.” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* [ISSN 0975-2935], Vol. IX, No. 3, (2017): 161-170.

And

B. Presented in the following conferences:

1. “Christianity and Popular Culture in Kerala,” in “The Second Annual International Kerala History Conference” held at The Department of History, Providence Women’s College, Kozhikode, Kerala in November 2014.
2. “Re-Inventing the Political: Visual Culture and Minority Interventions,” in the National Seminar on “Literature and Visual Arts: An Interdisciplinary Perspective” held at The Department of English, Sree Narayana College Kannur, Kerala in September 2009.

Further, the student has passed the following courses towards fulfilment of coursework requirement for Ph.D. :

	<b>Course Code</b>	<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Credits</b>	<b>Pass/Fail</b>
1.	HC 712	Literatures of the Third World	4	PASS
2.	HC 713	Self, Nation, and Text	4	PASS
3.	HC 730	Critiques of Modernity	4	PASS
4.	HC 617	Reading Contemporary Indian Literatures	4	PASS

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## **DECLARATION**

I, **Ambili Anna Markose**, hereby testify that the work embodied in this thesis entitled “**Performing Religion: Visual Publics and Christianity in Kerala**,” carried out under the supervision of Prof. M. T. Ansari, Centre for Comparative Literature, is the result of bona fide research during the full period directed under the Ph.D. ordinances of University of Hyderabad.

I declare to the best of my knowledge that no part of this thesis has been earlier submitted for the award of a research degree or diploma at any other university. This work is free from plagiarism and the certificate for the same is attached. I agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodganga/INFLIBNET.

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**Enrollment No. 09HCPH04**

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## *Acknowledgements*

This research has been a long journey and it has benefited from people, spaces, and time. The years I spent on this Ph.D. have been marked by ruptures and reconciliations; by movements and momentum. And I thank everyone who has helped and contributed to the learning process it had been, which made this a meaningful and memorable experience.

First of all, I thank my research supervisor, Prof. M. T. Ansari, for his patient guidance, encouragement, and friendship; whose enthusiasm and intellectual interventions in the field always inspire us to think beyond familiar frames and forms. I gratefully acknowledge his consistent yet un-interfering support which has been indispensable in difficult times of bewilderment and angst.

I am grateful to my Doctoral Committee members Dr. V. J. Varghese, Dr. Amit Kumar Mishra, and Dr. Anna Kurien James for their thoughts and suggestions. Thanks to Dr. Varghese's sharp and insightful observations which prompted me to think through the conceptual frameworks of the thesis.

I also thank Dr. Sowmya Dechamma, Dr. J. Bheemaiah, and Prof. Tutun Mukherjee at the Centre for Comparative Literature for their classes during coursework. Thanks to Sowmya for always being an affable presence.

Along with them, I wholeheartedly thank the CCL staff Ms. Rajani, Mr. Sreesailam, Mr. Mangeshkar and Mr. Balraju. A special mention to Rajani Ma'am for being an affectionate and lively presence in the Centre; she made my life as a student at CCL comfortable and pleasant; her earnest enquiries always reminded me of *time*. Much gratitude.

I must acknowledge Dr. A. Hariprasad, a dear teacher; and Dr. Saji Mathew and Dr. K. M. Sherrif for the guidance and support.

I am grateful to the opportunities I have had to interact with Prof. Susan Visvanathan, Prof. T. K. Nizar Ahmed, Prof. M. V. Narayanan, Prof. E. V. Ramakrishnan, and Prof. Udayakumar whose comments and suggestions proved decisive in different stages of the research. I would like to thank Prof. Visvanathan for her convivial approach and for suggesting certain important sources and texts relevant to the research.

Paul Zachariah willingly helped to locate his articles and V. T. Murali took his time to respond to my queries. I sincerely thank them for their time and effort.

I thank the organizers and participants of the course on *Researching the Contemporary* at CSDS New Delhi and the *Santander International Winter School* organized by Heidelberg University where I presented my work. In winter school; I must thank Dr. Isabel Eisenmann and Prof. Hans Martin Kramer for the administrative and academic help; and also Ulrich, Christiane, Stanislau, Pavlo, Giulia for the company; and Catherine for the *Last Supper*. I fondly remember Prof. Sylvie Le Grand Ticchi and Prof. Silke Lehmann for their observations about my work and for the many warm-hearted conversations we had.

I extend my gratitude to Dr. Kurian Thomas, Fr. Siju Koshy, and Fr. T. I. Varghese from Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam. Thanks to Sajiachan for all the help. The meeting with Fr. Dr. K. M. George was a pleasant experience and I express my gratefulness for his time and interest in the work.



My thanks are due to Bestin Samuel and Samuel Sir for their help in accessing certain important texts and archival sources. I also thank Yadu C. R., Vipin Kumar, Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, Jenson Joseph, Dileep Raj, and Muhammed Afzal for sending their works/articles and specific books on request.

I express my gratefulness to the staff at: IGML and Centre for Comparative Literature Library, UoH; Sahitya Academy, JNU, CSDS, and Nehru Memorial Libraries, New Delhi; Appan Thampuran Memorial and Sahitya Academy Libraries, Thrissur; C. H. Mohammed Koya Library, Calicut University; Malayala Manorama Archives and Orthodox Theological Seminary Library, Kottayam; CDS and KCHR Libraries, Thiruvananthapuram.

Last winter has been a memorable one; warmest thanks to Afzal, Bivitha, Fathima, Neethu, Shinaj, and the home. Bivitha reached out to me every time when I “disappeared,” read my drafts, lent me books, listened; my sincere thank you for the messages and for everything else.

I remember:

Arathi, Jananie, Tima, and Smitha; friends who are far away yet so close as always.  
 Dear friends Viju Kurien and Yogitha for the fun and merriment, who also helped to proof-read parts of the thesis; thank you for the honest criticisms.  
 My classmate and friend Salma Ashraf for the good times we had.  
 Jomy Abraham for the companionship during Delhi days.  
 Soumya Sajan for the coffees and laughs.  
 Megha Antony for a beautiful sight of Flamingo birds.  
 Levin Jacob, for her timely help, for “picturing” things beautifully.  
 Friends and fellow researchers Bipin, Lenny, Manju, Bharath, Chanthu, Shyma, Sreebitha, Varsha, Sandeep, Shubha, Aparna, Soumya C, Elwin, Deepa...for various reasons.  
 Dr. Brahmaputhran who offered the platform for an animated discussion on the topic.

Thanks to Dr. Asma Rasheed for being friendly whenever I showed up at her doorstep.

Greeshma C. K. and Anusha Thilakan made the last few years in UoH simpler, lighter, and happy. I am forever grateful for the spaces in your rooms and lives.

Much affection to Greeshma Justin for each and everything, from the beginning to the very end.

Thanks to the *Gethsemane* camaraderie which instilled the impetus to look into the divergences and differences of *belief*. Thank you Babuettan and Preejachechi.

Sandhya has been a patient and reassuring presence throughout, without which it would have been extremely difficult to see this through. Thank you.

I thank Sunnychachan and Saly auntie for their concern and encouragement; Thankachachan, Gracy auntie, Kunjumuthu, Kunjan, Evelin, Beena auntie, Lijina, Little Markose, Leenachechi, Mathewsettan, and Anupama for their presence.  
 Gratitude to my mother-in-law Leelamma who saw me through my difficult times with much patience.

Greeshma and Sandhya; always.

Thanks to my father.

Thanks to my brother Arun who instils hopes.

My mother made all the sacrifices to make sure our world is better than hers. My Grandmother Annamma (late) left memories of unconditional affection. I owe them immensely.

And Binu; for the love, forever.

## Introduction

What we *see* is foundational in making and unmaking our perceptions of the self and the other. The culturally and politically determined acts of *seeing/viewing* and the visual experience determine the interpretations of our existence and the meanings it engenders. And therefore *visuality*<sup>1</sup> or the politically implicated visibility of communities, individuals, traditions, and practices are significant texts and contexts in time and space. *Visuality* of religion implies performance of religion and it also defines religion as a performative act. At the same time, performance is an act and an event.<sup>2</sup> Performance becomes an event when it produces a discursive terrain of inaugural moments. The expression “performing” religion thus implies the inaugural moments in history available through religion’s symbolic, material, and epistemological significations. This research, in essence, looks into the politics of *visuality* pertaining to Christianity as a religious minority community in Kerala by engaging with religion’s performative and popular expressions.

To cite a recent example, Kerala Christianity became the subject of nationwide media attention in 2014 when members of its ecclesiastical order – of Roman Catholic Church – Sister Alphonsa, Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara, and Sister Euphrasia Eluvathingal had been pronounced saints by the Vatican. Despite the fact that the priest

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow the term “visuality” from Hal Foster (1988).

<sup>2</sup> “Event” as a philosophical thought is central to the work of Alain Badiou where the idea of “Events” is conceived “as ruptures with such an established situation, revealing ‘the void’, or what was previously ungraspable or unrepresentable within that situation, thus opening up new and previously unthought possibilities for thought and action. This ‘ontology of being’ is then supplemented by a ‘logic of appearing’ which provides a topological language for describing the way being appears in actual worlds with varying degrees of intensity” (Basset 2016: 281). Hence Badiou identifies “Event” as an inaugural moment where subject makes itself present through an intervention and thereby establishing a moment of rupture which becomes foundational to the formation of subject.

Chavara, among the three saints, is the only one who had an active social life,<sup>3</sup> the wide coverage in print, electronic, and visual media projected Catholic Christian's proud moment as an incident to be acknowledged with historical importance. The occasion was projected as an "achievement" of Christianity in Kerala, though it was a community-specific event concerning faith and religiosity of the Catholic Church in Kerala. And it was widely depicted as the moment of euphoria for the whole Christian communities of Kerala.

What is striking about the event is that it appeared more like the recognition of historical legacies of Christianity in Kerala than a matter concerning religiosity and faith. Soon after this event, one of the leading publishing houses in Malayalam, Mathrubhumi Books, came out with a volume of narratives on the newly canonized priest Chavara Kuriakose titled *Chavarayachan: Kerala Adhunikathwathinte Shilpi (Father Chavara: The Architect of Kerala Modernity)*.<sup>4</sup> Although the text seems to consolidate the saint-social reformer image through many testimonies on what has been identified as the visionary interventions of the priest, it struck a chord on the modernity narrative of Kerala. Besides the usual hyperbole on saintly life, the text appeared as a historic document for its emphasis on the imaginings of Kerala modernity essentially as a religiously motivated enterprise. The contextual relevance of the text and the title adequately substantiate the potentials of representative spaces in the visual dossier that facilitated such aphorisms. Of particular importance is the essentialization of modernity with the religious identifications of Christianity. This authorial position tacitly entails a historical subject of modernity which drifts away from the nostalgias of a hegemonic Hindu history; a nostalgia that forms the undercurrent of dominant social imaginaries in

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<sup>3</sup> Father Chavara had been active in educational and social reform initiatives where he pioneered many revolutionary changes in primary educational system of the state.

<sup>4</sup> John Mannarathara (2014)

Kerala. Thus, this historical subject who belongs to a different religious epistemology is always a dispossessed one that strives for legitimacy. Therefore, the way in which modern social imaginaries in Kerala marks Christian subjectivity tends to represent and camouflage a struggle for recognition within. And this is the preliminary thought upon which this research is based.

Furthermore, obviously, it is the visually significant event/text that becomes the available model to study what is represented and what is not. Therefore, this research takes up the question of visibility, as a discursive terrain capable of asking questions about representation in the first place. This question of visibility and the ways in which it is available for scrutiny make the basis of this study on Christianity in Kerala. The popular spaces of visual culture offer manifestations of common senses, ways of making sense of the past, and collective unconscious of a hegemonic society, and it further constitutes an interpretative method to historicize the present. Nevertheless, the intention of this research is not to produce a narrative of visual representations of Christianities in the region, but it aims to investigate the possibility of alternative readings that problematize the popular perceptions on Christianity disseminated through the visual media repertoire in the standard language of the region, Malayalam. By doing so, this study examines religion as a political category and the implications of being a minority in the secular modern state.

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In India, the imagination of a hegemonic and monolithic national community has symbolic energies and material manifestations in the public sphere. On one level, this includes the imposition of absolute ideas about the *essence* of religion and behaviour

purported to be religious, attempts to make connections between political behaviour and religion, and the construction of the minority identity in terms of lack, incompleteness, and deficit.<sup>5</sup> Systematic and institutional violence against its own people – the minorities, Muslims, Tribals, and Dalits in India – who are excesses or signifiers of lack is one of the most significant instances of it. On another level, these imaginations of a monochromatic national community redefine the otherwise heterogeneous faith communities as homogenous religious communities. And this inclination tends to erase and tame the diversities within. Apparently, in the case of minority religious communities – which itself are hybrid communities of faith – the most destructive implication of the mechanism is the homogenising tendencies in the way the idea of community is conceived.

To elaborate; in the same way, a monochromatic idea of community is embodied in the Hindu nationalist imaginary, the political category of religious minority tend to align towards an erasure of differences within. For them, this appears befitting for political legitimacy which further disengages the religious minorities from their own sense of self and history. Inside the religious community, this standardization tends to elicit an urgency to identify themselves as an internally undivided community bound together by a single marker of identification. In other words, in contemporary India, the monolithic social imaginaries on religious minorities explicate the community politics as well as embodiments of secular modernity in India. And this idea that differences are counterproductive to modern subjectivity and hence need to be tamed and subjugated, runs through popular perceptions and imaginations of minorities in India. That is, the

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<sup>5</sup> See more detailed observations on the dilemmas of secular modern ideals that leave the minorities as marker of lack and deficit in M. T. Ansari (2016) and Arjun Appadurai (2006).

religious underpinnings inherent in hegemonic nationalist imaginary elicit an urgency to form absolute notions of self as well as the other.

In the case of Christians of India, there have always been attempts to articulate a dominant and easily manageable idea of distinctiveness which would translate their identity claims as a legitimate one in the face of a national majority.<sup>6</sup> This is indeed a circular movement where the heterogeneous religious community of Christians had to make a claim against the monolithic secular modern nation state by being within and outside at the same time. Hence, visibility of a particular Christian identity is informed and implicated by the minority politics and political secularism in India.

Christianity has been one of the minority religions in the region which is now unified under the linguistic state of Kerala. According to census 2011, Christians constitute around 18 percent of Kerala's total population. Being a minority religion in Kerala, the study of its representational spaces of Christianity thus falls in the majority-minority problematic in the first place. The community of Kerala Christians has never been homogenous in terms of liturgical traditions, religiosity, and social stratifications. They are different religious publics with diverse traditions owing to the mass conversions from different caste-communities, colonial intrusions over early indigenous Christian traditions, and westernizing religious missions. Because of this, they have different and

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<sup>6</sup> Chandra Mallampalli cites an instance where C. Rajagopalachari, in the face of an impending transfer of power from the colonial regime to actualize the *Swaraj*, congratulated the "socially progressive, national community" of Indian Christians "for being a 'non-partisan' and 'non-communal' minority that had lent unqualified support to the nationalist movement" (2004: 159). Together with this, one must also note a comment made by Alphonse Kannanthanam; the Union minister of state and the first Malayali to become part of the Narendra Modi Government of *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP). Kannanthanam, a former Indian civil servant and an ally of *Left Democratic Front* (LDF) of Kerala before joining BJP, made a comment that; "People ask why I, a Christian, joined BJP. My answer to them is that Modi is doing what a good Christian is supposed to do. I would do whatever possible to realise the PM's dream of creating a new India where all Indians can live with dignity" (*The Indian Express*, 11 Sept. 2017). The promises and prospects pertaining to Christians of India expressed in Rajagopalachari's reassuring invocation and in Kannanthanam's claim clearly signal the various conditions and strategies in imagining a legitimate Christian identity in modern India.

often contesting histories, cultural legacies, and political allegiances. Thus the expression “Christianity in Kerala” cannot hold a single narrative of history and religious cosmology. Therefore, this study on Christians of Kerala tracks the history of Christianities in the regions unified as Kerala, as having multiple beginnings and rhizomatic existence that allows for multiple and unbounded exit and entry points and “operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, [and] offshoots” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 21). Nonetheless, in representative spaces as well as community narratives, these differences are often narrowed down to binaries of the dominant and the marginal by a historical claim of conversion made by certain faction: the community of Syrian Christians.

Syrian Christians historically maintain an elite status in the social structure and their self-definitions associate the origin of the community to a myth of apostolic conversion of Namboodiri<sup>7</sup> families in early centuries of Christianity in the region. Thus, they claim a caste lineage on par with the high-ranking Hindu communities of Kerala, effectively wiping out other ways of imagining self and subjectivity. Although none of such claims has evidential significance, Syrian Christians continue to be the dominant community among the larger Christian community and the popular perceptions about Christianity have been predicated upon the Syrian Christian identity. Currently, they are listed among one of the most influential communities in Kerala in terms of their social, cultural, and economic status (K. C. Zachariah 2016).

This means, complicating the intricacies of minority identity, the Christian communities of Kerala have complex caste community stratifications that define their identity articulations. The stringent caste discriminations inside Syrian Christianity in

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<sup>7</sup> A high-ranking caste Hindu community.



Kerala remained untouched by currents of reformist/social justice movements of the region. Furthermore, the histories of colonial religious missions and the new worldview that emanated from the spread of Christianity in India associated Christianity with the West and considered synonymous with western modernity which is perceived as detrimental and antagonistic to the “Indianness” and “tradition” (Pandian 2003; Mallampalli 2004: 87, 230). This implies that, though the region’s specific history of Namboodiri-Nair hegemony informs the configuration of the social space of Christians, it runs against the notion of Christians as the carriers of a western religion/modernity. Hence, arguably, these contesting identities triggered other paradigms of imagining a modern self within and outside the semiotics of religious community of Christianity.

As already said, the upper caste claim that runs through community narratives – past and present – are identified as an empty claim by historians and sociologists alike. And this research does not examine the premises and problems of either the claims or their critique at any length. On the contrary, it examines the mechanisms, which maintain the dominant claims as a discursive method that tame and erase differences – of community and of belief traditions. This is precisely because the study of empty claims, in some way or the other, fails to see the embodiments of the claims and contestations in the contemporary. And my research takes up a particular time frame to elucidate the political premises of these assertions and erasures of the self and the community.

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The diverse ways of defining and identifying Christianity – both as an ideology and as a faith practice – is most visible in the popular spaces of visual culture. And, as evident from the texts in question, this visual repertoire in Malayalam brings in an array

of religious polemics and pressing questions on the cultural politics of Kerala. This visual repertoire functions as an interpretative archive of remembrance and offers a method of making sense of the past within the interstices of the present social and political milieu. In fact, the dearth of studies in the area impairs the scholarship on minority discourses pertaining to Kerala to a considerable extent. This is primarily because Christian representations in the ambit of popular have been as complex as the religious stratification of Christians which makes it imperative to the understandings of nation form and identity claims. Arguably, popular texts and spaces in question can be viewed as an archive of the collective unconscious and the politics of Christian presences in that sphere and genres have not been a subject of serious study so far.

The attempt to look at the religious community from this vantage point of visibility probes the visual as a paradigmatic symbol of modernity and historiography. Such an analysis invariably involves frameworks that understand the symbolic meanings that the categories of caste, religion, and community have in the representative space at large. To that end, the research attempts to examine the uses of such categorizations in the sphere of popular so as to understand them as a politically relevant act and a visual event. The sociological and historical positions of Kerala's Christians in terms of Syrian Christian social life and aspects of religious syncretism inside the feudal and colonial regimes (Bayly 1989), sectarian specificities (S. Visvanathan 2010), and Church's engagement with an impending nation state (Mallampalli 2004) thus functions as a backdrop to this study.

In popular spaces, the taming, erasing, and manufacturing of difference have more latent meanings than obvious ones. The emergent visual publics in Kerala post-1990s offer an ensemble of these latent meanings and their embodiments. For example, in the

domain of popular-visual imaginations, Christian communities in Kerala with their diverse histories of descent, belief systems, and political mobilizations, have been crystallized into Syrian Christians and its “other.” In Malayalam popular media, when the caste-community-minority nexus establishes an invariable Syrian Christian self, it also ascertains its other – the heterogeneous population of Christian believers outside Syrian Christian institutionalism comprising of erstwhile untouchable caste communities of Dalit Christians and Christian communities which follow Charismatic and Pentecostal belief systems. Tracing the history of this inclination would lead to the conditions within which a normative Christian religious identity is formed in the cultural public sphere of Kerala. Implied in such a discourse are the claims and contestations that engender imaginings of Christian subjectivity. Strikingly, the Christian representations of the time, in some way or other, establish a necessity to bifurcate modern and nonmodern ways of being. And I argue that these bifurcations among “modern,” “premodern,” and “nonmodern” ways of being is the trope employed to establish the binary of Syrian Christian and its other. That is to say that, it is this idea and aspiration of modernity that produces Christian subjectivity in the popular spaces.

Hence, this study of Christianities in Kerala, in view of the heterogeneity of the people at stake, anchors itself on the fundamental aspect of various modes of identifying and registering “difference” in the popular. The term “popular” as used in this thesis signifies the visually significant text/event which tends to be foundational in the structure of society’s collective unconscious. And the relevance of the study, in particular, rests on the affective and symbolic energies of the visual publics in experiences of modernity and making sense of being and belongingness. This takes into consideration the indispensable connection between popular images and the structuring of publics. Thus a major concern of this research is the way these popular images establish, interpret, and re-define

“religion” in public and private spheres. My point of departure in the study is the manufacturing and manifestations of such differences and the way they engage with and spill over to politics, and problems of Christian subjectivity in modern Kerala. The thesis thus attempts to probe the semiotic and symbolic meanings of religious identity which – as conceived in the texts discussed – is considered both as a marker of identity and as an ideological claim.

This opening thought on the study is premised upon the following propositions. First one is about the way in which the minority self is established. It has been observed that a minority identifies itself so when it experiences a disadvantaged position inside the nation state (qtd. in Panikkar 2006: 149). Accordingly, this analysis on Christian subjectivity would probe the process of becoming “minoritized” (Mufti 2007: 12). This process of becoming minoritized leads to the second premise of the analysis which is the caste politics of Christianity in Kerala manifested in the hegemonic mediations of Syrian Christian community. This aspect concentrates on the ways in which Syrian Christian hegemony is institutionalized and made a paradigm of imaginings of modernity and minority self. The third premise is that the term minority is used both as a category capable of political dissent and as a marker of subalternity. By saying this, the thesis does not intend to undermine the subaltern subjectivity inside dominant Christianity. On the contrary, by looking at the paradigms of the process of minoritization, the study tries to engage with the discourses (or absence of it) within and outside the religious field to identify the internal others of religion and region/state. Largely, the thesis looks at the ways in which the representative spaces legitimate the dominant and the modes through which this process establishes and asserts minoritization culturally and politically.

Therefore, predominantly the analysis is premised on the argument that a universal definition of religion cannot be possible at any point of time in history (Asad 1993: 29). The minor positions of visual narratives are taken as a discursive platform of dissent and discontinuity with the normative and the normal. And this is done through a study of the community/self in the popular genres that triggers questions of the spectatorial positions and imaginaries on religion in “sacred,” “secular,” and the liminal spaces.

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Christopher Pinney observes: “Visuality and other embodied practices have played a central role in the constitution of Indian public culture” (2004: 9). This public culture has bearings on how a subject of the nation is imagined in the postcolonial state of India. In India, visual media post-1990s had an energizing role in the public culture which in turn became a major influence in reinforcing a hegemonic Hindu imagination of nation and community (Rajagopal 2008). This was a period when (Hindu) religious ideology explicitly came to the forefront to make decisions for the nation.

Mainstream Indian cinemas have had its share in imagining a new spectatorial position for the new citizen subject of the post-1990s India.<sup>8</sup> This cinematic imagination is foundational in the fear of minority, embodied in the Muslim subject, and started to define the nation and its subject inside the dialectics of a Hindu secular ideology. Within the ambit of this popular representation of minority in Indian popular cinema at large, a

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<sup>8</sup> The film *Roja* (Dir. Mani Ratnam, 1992) triggered many debates which initiated new directions in academic discourses on Indian popular cinema. The debates (popularly the “Roja debates”) attempted to critically look at this changing spectatorial imaginations in the most polemical way. Arguably, the discourses that *Roja* engendered re-defined Indian cinematic imaginations and academic scholarship on screen studies in an unprecedented manner. See Tejaswini Niranjana (1994; 2011); Venkatesh Chakravarthy and M. S. S. Pandian (1994); and S. V. Srinivas (1994).

Muslim can either be nationalist or terrorist at best. However, the political scene in Kerala does not always mirror the nationalist frame of majority-minority politics. This does not imply that Kerala's cultural milieu is insulated from the imperatives of the nation state in the wake of modernity. Rather, it suggests the need to locate the region's community configurations as a preface to understand imaginations of nation therein. This distinctiveness in framing minority owes to the strong presence of Christian communities in the cultural and political scene as opposed to the national imaginary of minority identity predicated principally on the stereotype of Muslim identity.

In Malayalam cinema post-1990s, the subaltern/minority self appears as a strong presence to mark the difference between "self" and the "other" through "a careful and strategic politics of inclusion" (S. K. Parayil 2014: 68). But, observably, the subaltern presences of cinema – especially in the case of the Dalit self – is used in a way as to emphasize cultural stereotypes on body, social behaviour, and so on, which connects to the cultural unconscious of the historical viewer (S. K. Parayil 2014; Anilkumar 2012). These subaltern subjectivities occupy "the subordinate visual spaces" naturally (S. K. Parayil 2014: 88). The dominant Christian representation in cinema positions itself as the "other" of the hegemonic Hindu self in Malayalam cinema (often the Brahmin/Nair self) with the quintessential Syrian Christian masculine figure. These Christian heroes replicate the masculine assertions predicated on community identity in the most visible and direct manner. What is striking here is the way this apparently dominant Christian presence itself mark a difference that subordinates them to the all-pervasive narrative of a hegemonic history of Kerala. The evading power of the upper caste claims of Syrian Christians and the rhetoric of western/Christian modernity have roles to play which ultimately result in re-defining Syrian Christian self and to strengthen cultural hegemony. Important in the discourses it produces is the way the Syrian Christian masculinity is

emphasized, which shows a rupture in the visual narrative of Malayalam cinema at large. This rupture raises questions on the typecast of Syrian Christian representation, and its historical and political premises. Precisely, this category of Malayalam cinema signifies the cultural unconscious that defines “the Syrian Christian identity” as a legitimate as well as subordinate self. And this further results in a second order narrative that defines the invisible “other” of the Syrian Christianity as such.

The post-1990s period witnessed, among other things, private television boom in Malayalam television industry. This phenomenon presented a marketplace for Christian media religiosity and Christian folktales and myths in primetime television, for the first time in Malayalam television industry. This space of the popular is a dynamic field of popular aspects of piety, faith traditions, subaltern religious experiences, and so on which are visibly at variance with the dominant cinematic imagination of the Christian. Though the cinematic imaginations and Christian religious media form different publics and spectatorial positions, apparently both of them have influenced Christian identity formation in the visual narrative in their distinct ways. The time frame is also marked with a celebration of “secular” images/events like that of the famous Malayali singer K. J. Yesudas which will be dealt in detail in the study.

The premises and politics of these varied and contesting publics raise questions about how the visibility of particular modes, genres, and representations feed into and make (use of) popular perceptions and thereby interferes in the public and private life of religion. For example, it would raise questions on how the representational politics of this visual repertory establishes a method of narrating the self and the other; and how it redefines and re-establishes binaries of “modern,” “premodern,” and “nonmodern” ways of being. These symbols, in short, also facilitate a genealogy of the Christian presences in

the popular through an attempt to decipher the meanings of the aesthetic representations as well as the *re-presentations* of Christianity.

As already stated, the visual imaginations of the time designate different modulations of imagining Christian subjectivity which tend to construct binaries having crucial caste community underpinnings in the hegemonic national community. It has been suggested that “the popular” in Kerala is rather a horizontal event which has to be studied incorporating different institutions that constitute it (Radhakrishnan 2010: 34). Thinking in this line; the events/texts that are discussed, though outwardly appear unconnected, demonstrate an account of the horizontal narrative-time through which the meanings of being and belonging to a minority religious community in postcolonial Kerala, can be deciphered. They make a case of contemporary Kerala through the visual publics and the popular images of Christianity in Kerala. A public is formed not only as a collective “bounded by the event or shared physical space” (Warner 2002: 50) but also as a community that shares emotional and ideological landscapes where they form notions of belongingness. For that reason, it is important to read the community histories in parallel with the symbolisms they make in the domain of popular-visual registers. In fact, the significance of the study itself lies in the multifaceted mediations of Christian identity which claims a normative self through hybrid structures in terms of caricaturing, demonization, and glorification in a way that compliments the aesthetic paradigms and political aspirations of Kerala as a cultural unit. Thus the dominant and counterhegemonic subjective positions appear as part of the same event and they offer instances of subjective claims, ethnic connections, and community identifications. The question at stake is, how do these horizontally distributed publics (un)make popular notions and bring in ruptures in the secular modern time. And this, in turn, can facilitate a scrutiny of the genealogy of religious rationality and epistemology as such.



Texts used in the discussion are drawn from different genres and cultural contexts because of the apparent continuity they show in explicating the different dimensions of the discussion. They include films, television series, magazines, photo features, etc., which offer interesting phases and modulations of the discussion. Along with texts in print and televisual media, the thesis also examines historical events in view of the spectatorial positions it engenders. In other words, while a text is considered as an event, an event is examined as a historical text. In the case of print and visual texts, the reading settles on a thematic analysis of the resources. However, the study attempts to locate the sites and contexts of the production of certain texts to understand the subject positions they entail. Precisely, the study looks at Christian identity and its various manifestations in different textual publics, both in terms of the spectatorial positioning as well as thematic renderings.

Specifically, the analysis starts with selected Malayalam films after the 1990s to the contemporary since they present a category of “Christian representation” onscreen which inscribe and authenticate a development narrative specific to this genre. Secondly, the thesis takes the figure of an artist as a trope to look at the performative aspects of the minority self. Here, the chapter takes up the case of the famous singer K. J. Yesudas to elucidate this point in terms of the historical premises wherein art and aesthetic judgments function as agents of cultural legitimization. Evidently, the social acceptance and recognition the singer enjoys also owes to the political underpinnings of the secular ideal he exemplifies. Apparently, the embodiments of the artist-self tend to offer a postsecular explanation of minority identity from within the complexities of political secularism in India. The third instance focuses on the ways in which popular Christianity becomes part of the culture industry at large by looking at the recurring presence of the Christian magician priest in popular spaces.

It has to be made clear at the outset that this thesis problematizes the visual events specific to the experiences of modernity and therefore is premised on the trajectories of Christianity in modern Kerala. For that reason, an examination of early Christian history does not have direct bearing to the questions at stake and is beyond the purview of this thesis. However, this is not a comprehensive analysis of all modes of visual registers but it has a rather narrow focus and time frame to facilitate a detailed analysis. Also, this research has not looked at similar movements and mutations in other religious communities in the region. A comparative analysis would possibly bring in other dimensions of the question of visibility and subjectivity, albeit with a different set of questions and recourses and therefore is beyond the scope of this study. Besides, the thesis relies more on representation and therefore could not consider the counterpublics that some of the texts signify which would extend the study in new directions of media studies.

Again, as evident throughout the study, the performances in the structuration of the visual publics exhibit an all-male world. The masculine assertions are the manifest claim and condition in the representational space of Christian religiosity in the popular. That is to say that, in this thesis, the performative agency of the religious subject is unambiguously gendered. And an enquiry into the question of gender paradox would form a different trajectory of Christian legacies in the region. P. Sanal Mohan, in his observations on women and religiosity in the history of Dalit Christianity in Kerala, makes significant remarks in this regard. According to him, Dalit women who were distanced from the spaces of ritual performances like *Mantravadam* in their pre-Christian phase became a prominent presence in the leadership of missionary congregations after conversion (Mohan 2017: 51-52). He further explains: “The missionary work among Dalits displayed some features of social movements in creatively mobilising women,

which had far-reaching consequences. Women also became articulate and began to take active part in congregational activities, a position that was subdued only after early Dalit congregations began to be shaped by the practices of dominant castes within the church”(Mohan 2017: 57). This suggests that Dalit women who had been kept away from the ritual practices remained shunned in the canonical Churches too. This gender prejudices in the Church erase and destabilize a history of revolutionary and liberating space Dalit women enjoyed in the missionary congregations. Evidently, the study of woman’s space and the history of Christianity in Kerala would ask different questions, bring into light other ways of analysing the category of belief, and produce different discourses of religiosity and the believing subject. Although this research tries to understand the politics that inform and structure the gendered discourses of belief and religiosity, an enquiry that specifically deals with the question of gender is beyond the scope of this thesis.

## **Thesis Outline**

The thesis is divided into four chapters apart from the introduction and conclusion.

### **1. Christians of Kerala: Communities, Politics, Memory**

Chapter one introduces the Christian communities in the present day Kerala and their political and cultural genealogies to facilitate an understanding of the significations they entail in the cultural public sphere. Christianity in Kerala, like in the case of many postcolonial regimes, holds an eternally uncanny relationship with the historical idea of modernity where Christianization resound modernization and vice versa. Apparently, the dominating presence of Syrian Christians in the premodern and colonial social milieu of Kerala generated a new language of minority politics amidst the secular modern aspirations. Observably, Christianity, being a minority religion which appears antagonistic to hegemonic nationalist sentiments and community imaginations, is always

expected to prove their legitimacy. The manufacturing of a homogenous Christian community of unmarked citizens is one consequence of this move. This idea of “unmarked citizen” negates caste politics of Kerala Christianity and defines this religious population as connected by religious affiliation and moral commitment to the community.

For this, chapter one briefly introduces the popular images and collective memories disseminated through visual and print media publics. The chapter attempts to flesh out the way in which the collective unconscious on Christian identity forms a binary – Syrian Christian and its other – in modern Kerala. Through observations on different Christian communities in the region and their structural and hierarchical distribution in the social sphere, the chapter prefates the visual landscapes of Kerala Christians. From the scrutiny of various events, the chapter delineates the reason why the question of minority identity and the tensions of a hybrid community of Christians become a paradigm of imageries worthy of study. Predominantly, the chapter examines public discourses and popular images of Christians by drawing examples from what can be defined as the popular memory of the Malayalam speaking community. The chapter scrutinizes the event of *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle 1958-59), Travancore ascendancy, and the beginning of a popular genre in Malayalam to understand the cultural and political premises wherein a popular image of Christianity is produced.

First three sections of this chapter try to outline the context of the study by drawing instances from the political milieu and community histories of the region. By doing so, the analysis attempts to explain the public lives of the religious community and the religious underpinnings of modern Kerala. *Vimochana Samaram* is taken as a specific case to elucidate the modes and strategies of identity articulations of community through the category of belief and the idea of community. Observably, Liberation Struggle marks

a point of departure and a political event vital for identifying Church as a political category in modern Kerala. This section contextualizes the study historically in view of the fact that the visibility of certain communities and the absence of other Christian faith communities can only be scrutinized critically along the lines of the changes the Church in Kerala experiences as a religious group. This has to be invariably juxtaposed with the history of Kerala and its Christians by looking at the political events and new religious movements, for which the materials used here include a selective reading of the new wave religious movements outside the fold of institutional Churches. The fourth section introduces the beginnings of a genre of popular in Malayalam through popular fiction, which in many respects, became the forerunner of a category of the popular Christian family dramas in Malayalam cinema. The chapter submits that, only by analyzing community, “belief,” and religious identity as separate empirical categories, having different genealogies, can the study of Christianity in the popular make critical interventions in existing scholarship.

## **2. Malayalam Cinema and Christian Representations**

In line with the observation that cinema functions as a significant political document of our times (Vasudevan 2002: 2), chapter two analyzes select Malayalam films of the post-1990s period as they present a paradigm of “the Christian” onscreen. This emphasis on the “Christian atmosphere” in Malayalam cinema and its premises need to be examined critically and the reading focuses more on popular Malayalam cinema. The popular versions of Christianity in a very popular visual medium offer new directions to decode the cultural politics of Christian representations in Malayalam. However, the chapter does not excavate the whole repertoire of films produced in the period. The choice of the films is based on their thematic rendering wherein a well-illustrated Christian family narrative and characterization define the grammar of the texts.

Apart from the introductory segment on Malayalam cinema and the spectatorial positions it entails, this chapter is divided into three sections each of which discusses the strategies of accommodating a “religious other” in Malayalam cinema. The first section tries to complicate the popular perceptions and political premises in which an agrarian nostalgia is manufactured in Malayalam cinema. Observably, this configuration of agrarian nostalgias uses the popular critiques of Kerala model and disintegration of Kerala’s agrarian sector to compose eulogy of feudal values. Arguably, “land” is the metaphor used to produce and promote such nostalgias which spill over to identity politics of cinema. The second section examines select popular movies to elucidate how the powerful Syrian Christian subject is appropriated into a monolithic idea of belongingness. This section concludes that hegemonic discourses of land, food politics, and gender stereotypes work in tandem with the minority politics of Malayalam cinema to demarcate Christian identity as an internal other. The third section problematizes the “secular marriages” common in many of these movies which make a direct engagement with the idea of Indian secularism and Christianity. Here, Malayalam cinema appears to offer an effortless shorthand to the dilemma of Hindu nationalism in accommodating its minorities, as well as to the predicament of an elite minority that strives to make reconciliations with its dominant other. This, in turn, explains the institutionalization, perpetuation, and the fissures of Syrian Christian hegemony – historically and culturally.

The films, unambiguously, use and establish Syrian Christian superiority claims to generate a homogenous narrative of Christianity in Kerala. Undoubtedly, they offer patterns of stereotypical imaginings of Christian identity. What is striking in this rather commonplace episode in the sphere of cultural representations is the way they use the caste politics of Kerala Christianity to imagine a hegemonic narrative of the land and its people. That is to say that the privileged positioning of Syrian Christianity in Malayalam

cinema has serious implications. For instance, an aspiration for the retrieval of feudal moral order lies underneath the films discussed which survives on agrarian nostalgias in Malayalam cinema. This move, I argue, is pivotal in structuring Christian subjectivity in a way as to complement the dominant imaginations of modernity and making sense of the past. To elucidate, though the Syrian Christian self is imagined akin to the dominant selves of the Malayalam cinema, the Christian subjectivity is marked with a lack (of legitimate history and self) which makes it an imperfect one striving for completeness. The attempts to decipher these “lacks” and their implications in representative politics of minority subjectivity, explicate subtle processes wherein Syrian Christian identity turns out to be the effect and catalyst of modernity. This process is done through fabricating secular modern ideals and agrarian nostalgias pertaining to the region of Kerala. Precisely, this chapter argues that Syrian Christian identity seems to be an imperative category in Malayalam cinema that defines the modernity experiences and imaginations.

### **3. Artist as Trope and Method: The Minority Question and Cultural Public Sphere**

The third chapter examines the question of Christian subjectivity in the sphere of arts and aesthetic judgments through the registers of popular Malayalam cinema and its essential component, the music. In doing so, this chapter tries to illuminate the persuasive power of popularity in the representative politics and minority discourses in Kerala. For this, the chapter takes the instance of the indispensable part of Indian cinema – the song/music. By drawing from Malayalam music industry and from the music traditions of the region, the chapter takes a specific case study of veteran Malayali Christian singer K. J. Yesudas where the popularity of the singer is located within the modulations of the cultural public sphere and minority discourses in Kerala. It would be an understatement to say that Yesudas is the most famous singer of Malayalam cinema. In fact, he grew to be the cultural idol of global Malayali community with a successful

career spanning over more than 50 years now. The unparalleled success of the singer made him the cult of popular music in Malayalam which triggered many discourses on music culture in Kerala/South India, minority/subaltern self in the field of performance practices, Kerala's public culture, modernity and so on.

It is in the post-liberalization period that Yesudas became a recurrent visual presence in Kerala through a series of events concomitant to the media revolution after India's liberalization move of the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Arguably, though Yesudas epitomized the "voice" of Malayali, it is after this momentous phase of Indian media that his visual presence became a persuasive symbol of music and of the performer in Kerala. Moreover, while remaining a Christian by birth and an ardent Hindu devotee in practice, Yesudas (identifies himself as a secular human being) is also a vocal supporter of secularism. Many studies on the Christian singer recognize the singer's success and popularity as the achievement of progressive Kerala and secular credentials of the modern nation state.<sup>10</sup> But not many of them had taken into consideration the shifts and transformations in the music cultures of the region in view of the aesthetic paradigms Yesudas authored. The emergence of such aesthetic judgments, in the case of K. J. Yesudas, inform and define the articulations of a minority self in contemporary Kerala. In this context, my primary concern is to discern the significations Yesudas makes in the public sphere at large.

The chapter begins by tracing characterizations of the artist in post-1990s Malayalam cinema in view of the community underpinnings of performance practices and aesthetic judgements pertaining to the visual archaeology of Malayalam cultural

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<sup>9</sup> Economic policies of liberalization broadened the scope of private and foreign investment in Indian market that led to service oriented private investments. One of the impacts of liberalization on Indian media is that it opened up opportunity for different voices and perspectives and thereby expanded the reach and magnitude of electronic media services which was earlier under state control. This paved the way for private television boom in Indian regional languages including Malayalam.

<sup>10</sup> See Ravi Menon (2011), S. P. Ramesh (2007), Paul Zachariah (2010), and Subhash Chandran (2012).



scene. Observably, what Yesudas is today, necessitates an understanding of the “classical” and “popular” elements of his voice, pitched against the political history of Kerala and the chapter investigates this binary through the oeuvre of Yesudas, the singer. The analysis includes a reading of visual media representations on the figure of the artist and public images of K. J. Yesudas in order to tease out the significations that the singer and the cultural public sphere carry over. For doing this, I use the theoretical frame of performativity (Butler 1990; 2009; 2010) to scrutinize *the performance* and the performing subject of modernity. Thus, the analysis asserts that Yesudas’s popularity is as much part of the visual archaeology as it is of the minority politics pertaining to Christianity in Kerala. That is, Yesudas does not simply author a particular taste and aesthetic value to music but “performs” it throughout. By implication, in the discursive realms of minority politics, the singer marks a significant phase symptomatic of religious and casteist underpinnings of the art cultures of the region. Hence, this chapter examines the ways in which Yesudas counters an imposed normative identity and looks at the problems of such counters, which ultimately leaves him as more of an empty signifier than an emancipatory possibility. In brief, the chapter argues that the ideal of secular modern in Malayalam cultural imaginations has had histories of appropriation and containment, engendering the minority Christian self to be the potent model for its manifestation.

#### **4. The Lost and the Liminal: Reading *Kadamattathu Kathanar* Chronicles in Contemporary Kerala**

Christianity in the popular appears in two ways, the former being an ideological positioning of the religious subject inside popular form as exemplified in the previous chapters. The latter is the way it appears as forms of popular Christianity inside the sphere of representations. The fourth and final chapter embarks upon the study of the animated sphere of popular Christianity in the visual landscape of Malayalam culture

industry. The representations of popular Christianity that occupies a fluid space require a nuanced reading since popular religions in many contexts have been attached to subaltern experiences and lifeworlds. Post-2000 Malayalam television industry brought forth an array of Christian serials which focused on faith practices and folk Christianity. Among it, a particular story about a legendary Priest, Kadamattathu Kathanar, became an instant hit. The most obvious and interesting element of it is the presence of magic and conceptualizations of a premodern Christianity. *Mantrikakathakal* or tales of magic and witchcraft enjoy wide currency in mainstream and minor literary cultures in Malayalam, serving different purposes though. In the 2000s, Malayalam television brought back the world of magic to its primetime viewers through a television version of the myth of a supposedly ninth century Christian magician priest. Therefore, the third instance taken up for analysis is the recurring presence of the priest Kadamattathu Kathanar in oral, print, and visual media spaces including cinema, theatre, and television.

It should be noted at the outset that this analysis does not venture to fetishize the empirical and conceptual dimensions of magic and witchcraft as an exclusive cultural marker of the orient. It is a plain prejudice and popular notion that essentially attaches magic and witchcraft to the “exotic” Orient and the chapter does not engage with that discourse, partly because such a discussion remains out of the purview of this research. The importance of the tale lies in its community politics which makes inroads into the modernity narratives of Kerala. Further, the study investigates the trajectories of modernity, of religion and the region, through the category of magic. That is, by explicating the politics of the popular religion in the popular media, the chapter engages with the concept of the liminal in the cultural history of Kerala. Specifically, the chapter

problematizes the tale of taming the *Yakshi*<sup>11</sup> which is the common thread in all renditions of the Kathanar story. Tale of Kathanar offers the potentialities of the liminal and profane space which opens up possibilities of critiques of the dominant experience and notions of religiosity. Thus, the recurring presence of the “nonmodern” or “premodern” in turn re-defines the minor in a different idiom which becomes the marker of discontinuity and erasure. The categorical exclusions that happen in the dominant history are axiomatic in the gender-caste-community tensions in the story. It is by excavating the politics inhere in it, that the analysis of this “minor” narrative in a major text<sup>12</sup> throws light on the politics of memory and narrativity in community history. To sum up, the chapter explicates how, by invoking the uncanny, the “minor” uncovers the politics of language itself and establishes a different order/semiotic system that is capable of disrupting and debunking the dominant paradigms of experience and knowledge.

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Thus, it can be argued that the act of “performing” religion is always contingent upon the political and cultural impasse of the historical subject of modernity. In summary, the manner in which minorities articulate their identities and the ways in which these identities are conceived and articulated in the sphere of the popular seem to make interesting paradigms as they cross over ambiguous and problematic contours of resistance, contestation, and assimilation. And, observably, this study of Christianities in Kerala through their popular representations is punctuated with narratives of the region’s experience of modernity and the ways in which various communities of Christians responded to it. The reading thus attends to the manner of how popular spaces mark

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<sup>11</sup> Vengeful female spirit.

<sup>12</sup> The most popular version of *Kadamattathu Kathanar* is found in *Aithihyamala* written by Kottarathil Sankunni.

Christianity. That is, the study tries to understand Christian presences in the domain of the popular as an event with multiple genealogies that ought to be read together. In brief, Christian subjectivity can legitimately appear either by translating their “lacks” into the dialectics of hegemonic imaginations of modernity exemplified in the aesthetic representations or remain antithetical to it through impossible nonmodern *re-presentations* of Christianity. In other words, it is by manoeuvring the idea of time in terms of its spatial and material embodiments that Christianity in the popular produces discourses of believing subject and a legitimate Christian subjectivity in contemporary Kerala.

## Chapter One

### Christians of Kerala: Communities, Politics, Memory

The study of cultural imaginations on Christianity in Kerala is necessarily connected to the analysis of communities, popular memory, and the way they manifest in the public sphere. This chapter tries to locate the cultural imaginations on Christianity in Kerala within the ambit of the visual culture practices by looking at events that are informed by the political existence of various Christian communities and sectarian differences within. The first three sections of the analysis look at the trajectory of the political and cultural milieu of modern Kerala to explain behaviours purported to be religious and communitarian as well as the religious underpinnings of the modern state. It briefly reads through the historiographical account of different strands of Christian communities in the region to elaborate on the political premises wherein the idea of the community has been formed. It would elucidate the way religion and religious practices manifest in the public and private spaces in that it becomes an important aspect of the subjective experience of the dynamics of religion in these spaces. The event *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle 1958-1959) is taken as a specific case to elucidate the modes of identity articulations of the community. Arguably, the *Vimochana Samaram* marks a point of departure from the premodern imaginations of religion and it was a political event vital for identifying the Church as a political category. This analysis is followed by a discussion on the interface between the idea of the popular and Christianity. In doing so, the section briefly introduces the genealogies of the popular imaginations on Christians and Christianity in Kerala by outlining the cultural repertoire of religion and spaces of the popular.

The history of Christianity in Kerala predates the European religious missions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the arrival of western Christianity. The dearth of reliable sources on the pre-missionary and pre-colonial Christian traditions and the rich assemblage of regional originary myths make the historiography of Kerala Christianity a challenging and complex exercise. Multifaceted conversion patterns, schisms over centuries, and the presence of expatriate communities such as Jewish Christians make it even more complicated. This complexity invariably accounts for interesting mediations in the collective identity of Kerala Christianity. Kerala Christians today are a heterogeneous community encompassing Dalit Christians, Syrian Christians, Latin Christians, and diverse groups of Protestant Christians from various castes and creed. Syrian Christians or St. Thomas Christians consider themselves culturally superior to other Christian communities of the region and they are the most prominent and influential community in terms of population, economic capital, and political representation; further, this community claims to be the oldest in the region. The most popular story about the origin of Syrian Christian community is associated with the apostolic missions of first century CE, specifically attributed to the supposed arrival of St. Thomas in 52 CE at the Malabar Coast. According to this myth, St. Thomas the Apostle arrived at the Malabar Coast, where he then converted a group of Namboodiri Brahmins – the high-ranking community in caste hierarchy – to Christianity. Syriac was the language of their liturgy because of the ecclesiastical connections they maintained with the eastern Syrian Church and thus, they were named as Syrian Christians. The second narrative about Syrian Christianity is associated with Thomas of Kana, who arrived from Persia along with a group of Christian families and clergy and established a Church under the patriarch of eastern Church. Nevertheless, none of these claims have been unambiguously proved with historical evidence. The claims of being apostolic converts add strength to the caste politics because

the self-proclaimed ancestry of Syrian Christians ties them to the descendants of the four Namboodiri families believed to have been converted by St. Thomas. Nonetheless, it has to be made clear at the outset that the Syrian Christian community does not stand as a unified whole with uniform liturgical, ecclesiastical, and theological doctrines. Major divisions among Syrian Christians happened in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, owing to the protest movements against westernising missions of European Evangelists to Catholicize the indigenous Christian community. In their attempt to “reform” the indigenous Church, the missionaries discarded the age-old customs and belief systems of the indigenous Christian community. For the missionaries, the regional practices were heretical and only Catholicism, that essentially comes from the West, represented Christianity.

Further, they have been divided into two major sections, one being under the ecclesiastical patronage of Roman Catholicism and the other adhered to its indigenous Syrian Christian tradition. Currently, Syrian Christians are distributed in different sections and denominations that include Episcopal Churches like Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian, Syrian Jacobite, Church of South India (CSI), Malankara Marthoma, Chaldean, Syro-Malankara Catholic, and so on. Among them, Catholics are under the papal authority and Roman Curia,<sup>13</sup> while oriental Churches have their own regional patriarchs. Apart from a common claim of descent, these are established independent Churches with separate theology, liturgical patterns, and centralized institutional governance. Amidst these communities, one of the primary differences lies in the tradition they follow in matters related to liturgy and theology. Other than these two prominent strands, there exists another segment of Kerala Christians within numerous Pentecostal movements and alternative communities with members being the dropouts

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<sup>13</sup> Administrative apparatus of universal Catholic Church.

from established Syrian Churches. According to the demographical statistics, a majority of Syrian Christians now belong to the Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup> Dalit Christians remain unrepresented and culturally alienated within the larger Christian community of the region.

Differences in Christianity throughout the centuries arise from its sectarian dilemmas that have a subterranean influence on the theorizations over these differences. While theological studies eschew the political underpinnings of the community, political theoreticians fail to capture its empirical life. Therefore, instead of tracing the linear community history, this chapter looks into the historical frameworks within which community and its various permutations make sense. This attempt would focus on the politics of the “appearance” of religion and religious “practices” in the public and private spaces, and the way the Church becomes a political category. Inevitably this attends to how religion as a collective experience and as a category of political identity is imagined within and outside the collective and the individual.

Apparently, Christian subjectivity is contingent upon the dilemmas of the minority question as well as the feudal undercurrents in the trajectory of modern Kerala. In other words, Christian subjectivity seems to be entangled in the modernity experience of the region and its multiple itineraries. The predicament of being a minority lies in the design of the secular modern state and “modern social imaginaries”<sup>15</sup> ensuing from that where minority identity signifies danger and lack culturally and politically. It is for this reason, it

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed analysis see K. C. Zachariah (2016).

<sup>15</sup> The term social imaginary is borrowed from Charles Taylor. In his conceptualization, “the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” which implies collective imagination of social surroundings by ordinary people “carried in images, stories, legends, etc.” (Taylor 2007: 172).



is important to look at the engagements between the political category of Christianity and the secular modern state.

Arjun Appadurai traces the minority problematic in relation to the history of political dissent and its ultimate significance in democracy (2006). Accordingly, this discourse of the minority-majority riddle paved way for the secularism debate based on the ethical commitment towards the citizen in countries such as India. Hence, the nation-state continues to rely on the perennial promises of the wellbeing of its people and the minority can only be talked about in the language of promises and welfare against common sense – “the fear of small numbers.” He extends the argument through an explanation of the emergence of predatory identities. As he puts it, predatory identities emerge from the tension between majority identities and national identities, and religion is one of the important factors causing their formation (Appadurai 2006: 52). According to him:

Predatory identities, in other words, are products of situations in which the idea of a national peoplehood is successfully reduced to the principle of ethnic singularity, so that the existence of even the smallest minority within national boundaries is seen as an intolerable deficit in the purity of national whole. In such circumstances the very idea of being a majority is a frustration, since it implies some sort of an ethnic diffusion of the national people hood. Minorities, being a reminder of this small but frustrating deficit, thus unleash the urge to purify.

(Appadurai 2006: 53)

Apparently, this fear of the minority, which encapsulates a design for purification, seems central to the conceptualization of secularism in India. Secularism’s promises of democratic citizenship find relevance in this context in view of the fact that secularism is

a constitutional declaration in India. Nevertheless, as Saba Mahmood has clearly stated, political secularism often privileges the religion of the majority (2015). In India, the rise of the political right and the emergence of Hindu secularism underline this argument. Indian secularism, as it is identified by social scientists, “has been implicitly regarded as Hindu upper-caste and modernized upper-class all along” (Menon and Nigam 2007: 58). Secularism can further discredit the liberating powers it professes when it begins to define religious life by “stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks and quotidian practices” (Mahmood 2015: 3). Political secularism influences the ways of doing politics and the political itself. When secularism becomes more of a normative category and belief than a discursive platform and method of accommodating difference, it fails itself. Arguably, this idea of secularism tends to elicit the urge to purify and stigmatize the minority/other self by emptying out their subjective specificities.

In the context of Kerala, such purification happens in a space wrought by feudal history. That is, the second premise of Christian subjectivity can be located in the caste-community-feudal histories and the extensions of the value models derived from it. This is particularly important considering the upper caste claims of Syrian Christians and the social privileges they enjoyed while comparing to the state of subaltern subjects within Christianity. Thus, it can be said that, in the case of Kerala Christianity, the question of minority identity has to be understood within caste-community politics. Further, it evades the paradigmatic discourses of minority politics predicated on the Hindu-Muslim binary. In light of this observation, the following section tries to read the discourses pertaining to the question of cultural and political legitimacy through traces of feudal excesses in the conceptualization of the region/nation and religious identity. This section attends to specific debates in contemporary Kerala so as to illuminate the implications of feudal

nostalgia. Apparently, this feudal nostalgia becomes imperative in the making of the idea of political legitimacy that is crucial in the idea of minority identity. This examines the connotations of feudal glory axiomatic in the continuing prominence of Thiruvithamcore (Travancore) region in the cultural imaginations in Malayalam where Travancore is largely considered tantamount to the idea of Kerala.

### **Feudal Memories and Community Imaginaries**

Social imaginaries engage with notions of moral order (Taylor 2007: 159-171). And observably the public sphere pre-supposes an order of rationality and moral authority. This implies that being the legitimate heir of social imaginaries ensures access to the public sphere. Seemingly the feudal repertoire available in the language of governance and persuasions of modernities constructs social imaginaries predicated on religious identity. This offers a different paradigm for understanding contemporary public sphere and Christianity in Kerala. The controversy on Padmanabha Swami temple treasure is apparently the visible instance that illustrates the hegemonic Hindu belief that subsumes the public sphere of Kerala. Evidently, the feudal nostalgias entwined with mythical tales on the princely state of Travancore have been the substratum of the imagination of Kerala as a self-governing community of rational individuals. Travancore's label as a model and modern state<sup>16</sup> underscored the authority such narratives have in imagining a unified community in the wake of modernity.

The political history of communities and the underpinnings of feudal value systems that continue to have a strong presence in structuring the public discourses in Kerala have to be read in relation to each other so as to elucidate the nature of public

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<sup>16</sup> It has been observed that in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the political milieu in the state of Travancore projected an image of a welfare state showing political behaviors of nascent public sphere, and in many respects, it feigned notions of modern model welfare state by simultaneously maintaining the exclusivist majoritarian ideology (Devika and Varghese 2011).

domains and the articulations of community identities. The Sree Padmanabhaswami temple treasure controversy<sup>17</sup> is a telling example illuminating the nature of political modernity and religious-community politics of the region. The temple and the hitherto unknown treasure triggered debates that scrupulously attended to the anxieties of Hindu elites represented by the members of the erstwhile Travancore royal family. The claims on the authority over the wealth and administration of the temple went through rounds of legal disputes since the treasure and its accumulation had a complex history.<sup>18</sup> According to the myth, during the reign of king Anizham Thirunal Marthandavarma, the kingdom of Travancore was symbolically surrendered to the Hindu Lord Padmanabhaswami, an incident famously known as *Trippadidanam*<sup>19</sup> and vowed that henceforth, the heirs of the kingdom would only be a *Padmanabhaswami Dasan* or the servant/agent of Lord Padmanabhaswami. Thereafter, Anizham Thirunal wanted to maintain this practice in the matters related to future territorial and monetary acquisitions. This positioned the monarchs of Travancore in the pedestal of self-sacrificing leaders and subsequently, the symbolic act began to be recognized as the parable of ultimate political virtue. The current disputes over the temple administration have questioned the authority of the erstwhile royal family both in matters of ritualistic practices and on the huge material possessions accumulated in the temple for centuries. The public discourse over regal authority had its anchorage on the divine agency attributed to the Travancore kingship. Adherence to the divine agency theory, by implication, re-visits the feudal structures

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<sup>17</sup> Padmanabhaswami temple located in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala has been found with a treasure of immense gold and precious stones collections which was hitherto unknown to the public. The temple has been managed by a trust with members of erstwhile Travancore ruling family holding key administrative positions which is now subject to legal disputes.

<sup>18</sup> The temple treasure is said to have been in possession of the erstwhile royal family for centuries and is supposedly the largest of this kind in Asia. Many of the precious articles found so far prove that they travelled from different geographies across the world over centuries.

<sup>19</sup> Anizham Thirunal Marthandavarma was the ruler of the princely state of Travancore during 1705-1758. In a ceremony called *Thrippadidanam* performed in 1750, he symbolically surrendered his kingdom to their deity Sree Padmanabhaswami which means that the king considers himself only a custodian of the property not an owner. Henceforth the king is only a *Padmanabhaswami Dasan* or the servant of Lord Padmanabhaswami.

centred on autocracy. In this context, the supremacy of the king is tantamount to the role of the spiritual leader, and it underlines the indiscernible powers of the royal family. To put it simply, in the canonical dictum, power is divine.

An examination of the cultural narratives pertaining to the history of the regions that are now unified as the state of Kerala would be meaningful in the discussion. Arguably, popular memory draws heavily from the feudal repertoire of cultural hegemony. Mythical elements weaved into the imaginations of a community which share a common language tends to be the most significant tool used to justify the morale of feudal hegemony. Examples are plenty in the feudal repertoire. The idea of a unified Kerala imbued with concepts of an ideal state is one among them. Various instances that exemplify the arguments posed here are available for scrutiny. They range from early twentieth century movements where Kerala and a new Malayali had been imagined through a series of events such as the introduction of “national festivals,” language forums, social reform movements, and so on. The most important among them, which reflects the idea of popular sovereignty, is the Mahabali myth<sup>20</sup> where the king offers himself to be the sacrificial animal for failing his country and his people. This aspect of kingship appears not as an evading memory but as a recurrent image symbolizing the essence of tradition against the odds of modern statecraft and democracy. The same rhetoric of tradition is operational in *Padmanabhaswami Dasa* narrative of Travancore monarchy and in cultivating popular memories over it.

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<sup>20</sup> Mahabali is the mythical figure, who is believed to be an *asura* ruler of the region and is often held as the metaphor of righteous regime. According to one of the popular myths, he was a righteous ruler under whose regime the region flourished to become the ultimate metaphor of prosperity, equality, and integrity. But as he was an *asura*, Mahabali’s popularity ignited the jealousy of gods who approaches the Lord Vishnu to put an end to Mahabali’s reign. Thus, through a clever plot, Lord Vishnu in the guise of Vamana, ousted the king from his land.

The literary representations of the king become important in view of the many manoeuvrings of the corporeal presence of the king in defining kingship. While referring to C. V. Raman Pillai's historical novel *Marthanda Varma*, Udaya Kumar observes that, "[t]he story of Marthanda Varma, the eighteenth century king of Travancore, often regarded as the story of the formation of a state through the destruction and subjugation of a world of older ties and customs becomes, in C. V.'s hand, a story of the protection and restatement of custom in the face of impunities and corruption" (2002: 181). He continues to elaborate on how the king is less kingly and more like a subject of his territory. Therefore the king never fully appears as a monarch and the identity of the ruler switches to that of a subject. In C. V. Raman Pillai's historical novels, seemingly, these imaginations envision modern political authority premised upon popular sovereignty. This cannot be understood within the framework of modern political regimes. However, it offers an instance to see how such imaginations work in the literary form that is identified as part of a nation in the making. Malayalam popular spaces tend to translate feudal pasts as the glorious era and they are simply eulogies of the monarchy. These eulogies often juxtapose autocracy with a democratic system and try to project the "the bright side" of monarchy. Undoubtedly, the discourse which associate kingship with modern ideas like democracy offer a common ground for political imagination predicated on feudal value system and hegemony.

Feudalism sustained on the caste privileges on the ownership of property. Coming to the story of Marthanda Varma, his monarchy symbolically offers an agency to the subject through divine authority by the projection of the ruler as the representative of the deity. That is, ownership of property is symbolically shifted to deity and power is retained with the ruler. In other words, symbolically the king and his subject share the same sense of ownership and subordination to the deity. Hence, outwardly, *Thrippadidanam* is a

promising and populist condition favouring the welfare of the people. Therefore, it is the religious identity and devotion to that particular deity that qualify one to be the rightful subject of the kingdom. Thus, if the kingdom belongs to the Lord, so do the king and the subjects. This condition can be translated as the existence of a supreme authority that is equally responsible for them too. The divine authority theory remained impervious as the king grows into the spiritual authority because of his posture of a sacrificial self who refuse to own material possessions and thereby establish an ascetic mode to the monarchy. Thus, to be qualified to be the subject of the monarchy, one has to carry specific religious identity. Precisely, the legitimacy of the subject is essentially filtered through devotion and belief and by implication, accessible exclusively for the Hindu elite. The other communities, especially the two major religious communities of the region, Christianity and Islam, and various Dalit communities remained outside the purview of this idea of sovereignty. They are deprived of the privileged spiritual domain of kingship that their Hindu counterparts enjoyed. Thus, the Padmanabhaswami devotee became the legitimate citizen of Travancore; an idea that spills over to cultural imaginations of modern Kerala. And this idea of political legitimacy has a historical continuity which is foundational in modern political identities. This testifies the strange and at times revitalizing afterlives of feudal nostalgias. When thinking in this line, the significance of Travancore – which is still the administrative centre of Kerala – in cultural representations in Malayalam is self-explanatory. This suggests that being part of hegemonic Hindu religion seems to be the precondition within which even the modern subject is imagined in Kerala.

The glorious stories of kingship in Malayalam popular films underline this preoccupation with feudal pasts. The film *Nadodimannan* (Dir. Viji Tampi, 2013) is an example of this where a king himself appears and thus evades the burden of symbolisms

and allusions. The protagonist Padmanabhan venerates feudal history of the region and the erstwhile king of Thiruvamkodu, alluding to the princely state of Thiruvithamcore. In a quintessential scene proving his reverence to Thiruvamkodu kingship, Padmanabhan stops a group of protestors' attempt to block the king's car on his way to a routine visit to the temple. When his friend starts abusing the king, Padmanabhan intervenes and "corrects" his "ignorant" friend by proclaiming that Thiruvamkodu kings are supreme models of progressive leaders who were instrumental in the development of the region. His reasoning proposed a comparison of the feudal rule with democratic state and the virtuous king is contrasted with contemporary political leaders. The latter is described notorious for impairing development and for their negligence towards the needs of people. The significance of religiosity illustrated by the visit to the temple, the visible expressions of loyalty, and the aspiration for feudal governance have to be read along with modern political imaginations of Kerala. In the film, the political culture of the society is exemplified by political activism represented by the public protestors on street in the scene. Strikingly, the protagonist is named Padmanabhan, the symbolic owner-God of Travancore. Implicitly the Lord (Padmanabha) is the subject here alluding to transfer of power from monarchy to democracy which ideally gives power to the subject. However, feudal hegemony remains unaltered. Viewers are also told that it is Padmanabhan's father who preached him about the good times they had under the monarch. At this moment, in an attempt to introduce a humorous interlude, his uneducated friend, observably occupying a subaltern position in the narrative, laments his deceased father's ignorance as the reason for his embarrassment. Although the incident is a trivial segment in the film's plot, the subtexts deal with discourses on contemporary Kerala public sphere. And the invocation of feudal nostalgia essentially erases or appropriates subaltern memories. In other words, the hegemonic public sphere is



predicated on the refutation of subaltern/other histories. This is an instance where we find the afterlives of feudal nostalgia and the ways in which the “other” become important thereof.

Within these discourses, hence, Travancore is reclaimed as the imaginary landscape of feudal memory. That is to claim that there are layers of meaning embedded in identity assertions of Syrian Christians (as a Travancore Christian legacy) within the sphere of cultural representation. By sharing caste myths and its prerogatives, Syrian Christian imaginations of region and community tend to rely on the political significance of Travancore as a trope and metaphor to reinstate feudal memories within the discourses of history and community. In cultural representations at large, Syrian Christians quintessentially hail from Travancore. In Syrian Christian family movies, the geographical location always being Travancore has to be understood within the interstices of this logic. By implication, the way in which caste works within Christianity is contingent upon the idea of region as engraved into the strictures of the modern state.

### **Political Modernity and the Event of *Vimochana Samaram***

In his observations about caste and Indian modernity, M. S. S. Pandian has argued that “[b]oth the acts of naturalising caste and denying it any specificity, work in tandem to invalidate caste as a relevant category in public sphere and politics” (2002: 1737). The caste politics in Christianity is an example to think through this observation because within Christianity there is a tendency to normalize it as an *invisible* (not non-existent) category. This is one of the important ways through which Syrian Christian identity had been hegemonized. Studies on the Syrian Christian community identity and its contemporary mediations are incomplete without looking at this aspect of the community and further identifying the religious experiences that accompany it.

In different degrees and terms, modernity interfered as attempts of community reform among the communities of Kerala Christians. Apparently, Syrian Christians were not affected by larger currents of social reform movements in matters related to caste practices and customs; their changes were mostly related to juridical and legal matters internal to the community, such as subjects concerning property and inheritance law (Devika and Varghese 2011: 112). It has been argued that the colonial missionary interventions among Syrian Christians were limited to colonial education and imitations of colonial architecture. T. M. Yesudasan has made many crucial remarks about LMS (London Missionary Society) and CMS (Church Mission Society) missions in southern Kerala and Syrian Christian engagements with them in his work *Chettitheruvile Dwishadabdikal (Bicentenaries in Chettitheruvu)*.<sup>21</sup> He says:

Unlike the LMS missionaries of southern Travancore, who from the very beginning had been integrating the slaves into its religion and endorsed revolutionary movements like the upper cloth rebellion, CMS missionaries were, from the start, fated to remain as *Ezhuthaashaanmaar*,<sup>22</sup> serving as the English language tutors of Namboodiri Christians of Kottayam. This extra-evangelical mission led to the implanting of the notion in at least some people that modernity was all about teaching English to the elite. . . . Syrian Christian modernity was nothing beyond English education and plantation bungalows. The humanistic ideal of enlightenment was completely alien to them. (my trans.; Yesudasan 2016: 18)

For Syrian Christians, while caste politics remained unaffected by the emancipatory promises of modernity, it mattered in their collective social space owing to their tradition in commerce and trade. In Travancore, Syrian Christians' engagement with fortunes the

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<sup>21</sup> Chettitheruvu is the place in the district of Kottayam, Kerala where Diocesan centre of Church of South India (CSI) is situated.

<sup>22</sup> Traditional language tutors.

developmental modernization has increased their rate of mobility and economic stability. It has been observed that the flowering commercial economy in the nineteenth century – mainly through commercial cultivation, foreign imports, and the resultant space in the global network of exchange and economy – marked Travancore's modernization (Mohan 2006: 36). This led to new modes of articulating Syrian Christian casteist self in compliance with the emergent notion of the “productive industrious citizen” (Devika and Varghese 2011: 111).

In addition, the post-independent socio-political environment in Kerala witnessed waves of reformist attempts and developmental projects in tune with the stream of the developmental nationalism.<sup>23</sup> This developmental project included land reform movements and peoples' campaigns that paved way for the formation of an elite class space where caste was disguised as taste, hygiene, health care, etc. This new worldview started to gain currency among the upper caste aristocracy who were eventually attracted to communist movements. The communist movements, on the other hand, idealized this worldview by completely denying the power of caste to remain as a potential barrier to free movement and social mobility in all fields of associational life. Noticeably, this inclination was supplemented by the demonization of aberrant voices within. This idea of modernity in the backdrop of the newly formed linguistic nationality in Kerala engaged with the sensibilities of the dominant Christian community which, using the same logic, excluded Dalits from social spaces promised by conversion.<sup>24</sup> In a nutshell, the political economy of the region thus became foundational in defining the cultural identity of

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<sup>23</sup> Developmental Nationalism refers to a discourse where nationalism is conceived as conducive towards the idea of development. It has been observed that Developmental Nationalism is a historical category and it “attempts to construct political economies of development” and thereby promises a “better tomorrow” (Desai 2009: 3-4).

<sup>24</sup> P. Sanal Mohan observes how in the missionary congregations, Dalits were excluded citing their “despicable” conditions where hygiene and healthcare were given emphasis to justify their exclusion from these social spaces (See Mohan 2006: 43).

Syrian Christians.<sup>25</sup> On one hand, this further amputated the Syrian Christian image and distanced them from the cultural public sphere through essentialist notions about taste, cultural legacy, and caste prerogatives which, only the elite Hindu could claim and become the legitimate heir to.<sup>26</sup> But on the other hand, Syrian Christians simultaneously utilized it as a strategy to claim a new mode of citizenship in the developmental modern state where they acted as the agents of a developmental project of modernity. It is only at the historical event of *Vimochana Samaram* that Syrian Christians could consolidate a pan-Kerala Christian sentiment wherein they had to address the question of difference and the Dalit identity. Nevertheless, they addressed the Dalit question, not in terms of caste politics but by camouflaging it with the question of belief and commitment to religious ethics. In doing so, Syrian Christianity tried to relegate caste question to the second order narrative of Christianity, which was often sabotaged by the power politics of the mainstream.

Archiving has always been selective memory, and therefore, “history” continues to work in tandem with power politics. Invariably, historiography has to tackle fundamental questions on standards of selection. Commemoration of origin myths is particularly significant in asserting community identity. They are part of community archives and therefore require careful scrutiny. The self-narratives of the Syrian Christian community tend to define modernity as caste prerogative and based on developmental nationalism. They consider themselves a legitimate part of this modernity that maintains the caste privileges they have been enjoying. How the Syrian Christian community narratives acknowledge the modernity project becomes problematic, considering the way they tend to obscure missionary histories and lower caste communities’ engagement with

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<sup>25</sup> Chapter two discusses this point in details to identify the political use and embodiments of this Syrian Christian identity.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter three.

them. T. M. Yesudasan explicates this point in detail. Taking the historiography of CMS College Kottayam, he illustrates the politics of memory and historiography as a terrain of strategic exclusions and legitimacy claims. According to him, such obscurities cater to hegemonic and homogenous originary myths. In his critique, he points to the strategic move towards manoeuvring a hegemonic history of CMS College by inventing a new narrative of origin which completely negates the subaltern memories attached to the institution. The discovery of an earlier origin day and the pompous celebration of the bicentenary of CMS College is, according to the author, part of the endeavour to weave in a homogeneous history that categorically erases Dalits and lower caste spaces in history. This essentially reinstates Syrian Christian hegemony legitimating its ideological apparatuses.

The resemblance the originary myth described in the text has with the origin myth of Syrian Christians – the myth of Namboodiri conversion to facilitate caste exclusivity – is remarkable. The attempt to tag CMS college history solely as a community event through relegating subaltern presences from them is nothing but the extension of the Pakalomattom<sup>27</sup> fixation that Syrian Christian histories are marked with (Yesudasan 2016: 20). The attempt to construct a history of Syrian Christian hegemony then works hand-in-hand with exclusivist Brahmin histories projecting upper caste gallantry and their invented intellectual supremacy. One of the reasons why the discussion of modernity of Christianity pertaining to Kerala starts and ends with Syrian Christians in many of the early narratives of community history point to this politics of history. Apparently, Dalits within Syrian Churches serve the enumerative social significance of the Christian community at large. And this has been critiqued in that most of the centenaries and

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<sup>27</sup> Pakalomattom is the name of one of the four Namboodiri families believed to have converted to Christianity in first century by St. Thomas according to the origin myth of Syrian Christians.

jubilees turn out to be a commemoration of Syrian Christian tradition wherein Dalits remain perennially as sheer crowd without having agency and subjective potentials (Yesudasan 2016: 27). The CMS college instance is one of the countless similar events. Kerala's foremost political memory after state formation, the historical incident of *Vimochana Samaram* and the many ways it is reinvigorated in the present, can be considered as a landmark in this genus.

The political and cultural premises of the protest have been analyzed extensively by many scholars. Nonetheless, not many of them acknowledge the subaltern presence in the movement. The way the narratives on *Vimochana Samaram* relegated the lower caste and working class population of the movement is appalling. In fact, they were active laypersons in the movement. The widely quoted story of Flory, a woman from the fishermen community of Cheriya Thura from Thiruvananthapuram district who was killed in the police firing during a protest march in 1959, clearly underscores the massive gathering of the lower strata of the faithful. Celebrations and memorials of *Vimochana Samaram* emphasize the electoral power and amplified political mileage of the Christian community after the struggle. But, Flory and the generations of the communities she represents remain invisible except on occasions where martyrdom can be utilized for political bargaining. Death is used only to create melancholic memories of a sacrificial self so as to ascertain a pan-Christian community identity. If not, they are simply erased to oblivion. This underlines Yesudasan's critique that Dalits continue to remain a nameless crowd in centenaries and community celebrations of Syrian Churches.

It may be argued that the trajectory of modernity facilitating assertive Christian identity, therefore, is predicated on community politics that made the subaltern experience tangential. The assertive political identity of Christianity has to be investigated

in the backdrop of this trajectory of Dalit Christian experience. However, in doing so, this analysis does not venture into an archival study of various communities. For the purpose of this thesis, I restrict the analysis to the transformations that the religious community of Christians of Kerala underwent in the past few decades in the light of the idea political modernity.

Mobilizations based on community affiliations were not new in the political history of Kerala. Movements such as *Nivarthana Prakshobham* (Abstention Movement), *Malayali Memorial*, and *Ezhava Memorial* in nineteenth and twentieth centuries that were addressed to the rulers of Travancore and Cochin princely states are instances of this, though articulated in a different idiom.<sup>28</sup> The political significance of *Vimochana Samaram* seemed to be predicated on the cultural memory it precipitates among Christian communities in the region. The attempts to call for *Randam Vimochana Samaram* (Second Liberation Struggle)<sup>29</sup> by the Catholic Church in 2005 exemplify this. *Vimochana Samaram* was a significant moment in the history of Kerala that added vigour to political manoeuvrings specific to the modern state. It precipitated cultural memories of different kinds, both for those who participated in it and because of the spectacle it presented signalling the future of community politics within the secular democracy. It thwarted the then-government, which was the first democratically elected communist government in history. It also marked the beginning of a new political language and

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<sup>28</sup> *Malayali Memorial*, *Nivarthana Prakshobham*, and *Ezhava Memorial* are movements for various ends from different caste communities of Travancore. *Malayali Memorial* was a memorandum submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore in 1891 demanding job opportunities to educated natives; the signatories included members from Nair, Christian and Muslim communities. Following this, Dr. Palpu initiated the *Ezhava Memorial* in 1896, petitioning similar rights to Ezhava community. *Nivarthana Prakshobham* was a movement demanding adequate representation in legislature.

<sup>29</sup> *Randam Vimochana Samaram* the Catholic Church in Kerala threatened to stage in 2005 had self-financing professional colleges at the centre of controversy. Catholic Church protested the Governments' attempt to bring in regulations aimed at the fixation of fee structure and prohibition capitation fee and they argued the move is detrimental to minority rights.

opened up the discourse of the community-individual subject dichotomy within the modern state.

The massive agitation in 1958-59 against the government of Kerala later called *Vimochana Samaram* by its leaders, is a landmark in the political history of Kerala. The struggle was primarily a response to the proposed bills on land reform and education reform put together by the then-communist government. The government's efforts to implement the amendments invited aggressive responses from Hindu and Christian communities of the region under the leadership of Syrian Christians and Nairs. The proposed land reform bill was opposed by the Nair Service Society (NSS) since a majority of the landed class was Nairs, who would have been the most affected by the bill. The education bill provoked the Syrian Catholic Church since the maximum number of schools in the private sector had been owned by them. Both these legislative moves had far-reaching resonance in these communities who were exhorted by the community leaders to reclaim their economic rights and community autonomy through active resistance and protest. The community leaders could project the issue as detrimental to the community interests at large. Land reform bills, though conceived in order to address the acute problem of landless peasants and tenants, failed in their core objectives, as the landless workers did not benefit from them even after five decades of the celebrated amendment. This can be considered as the first incident that gave visibility to the two dominant communities in Kerala's evolving postcolonial public sphere as potential units of civil organizations. Liberation Struggle's propagandist protest is significant in many respects in the region as it signalled the political potential of organized mainstream religious groups.



Visuality of church in Kerala and its evolution as a political category owes much to *Vimochana Samaram*. In what follows, this chapter analyzes community as a political category in terms of the manner in which it is constituted through various discourses. Predominantly, through an inquiry of events post-1950s, after the formation of the linguistically unified Kerala, the analysis would look into the transformation of the hitherto loosely defined community as a modern political category. Specifically focusing on *Vimochana Samaram* of 1958-59, this section would look into the ways in which the event could effectively mobilize the laity, create spectacles of religious-community sentiments, and transform the way the public perceived the issues. This apparently triggered the mobilization of community sentiments through newer modes of expressions of the religious self. *Vimochana Samaram*, in this sense, is pivotal in pioneering the change in the way the faithful imagined themselves within the community as well as disseminating a common sense of a monolithic Christian community.

*Vimochana Samaram* seemed to be imperative in identifying the dilemmas of minority problematic within the secular modern state, simultaneously emphasizing the need for a politically organized community as opposed to the Church being a mere religious institution. The collective agency displayed in *Vimochana Samaram* is specific to modern society's tendency to devise collective actions through it.<sup>30</sup> Partha Chatterjee has pointed out the unfeasibility of western theoretical frames on community to understand the Indian social reality. He has elucidated how the treatment of the community as something lethal to modern liberal social contacts would be inadequate to understand its nuanced social and cultural meanings.<sup>31</sup> In fact, movements that presuppose a community authorize the existence of the same. Further, the community in

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<sup>30</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj identifies collective agency as specific to modern societies (2000: 140).

<sup>31</sup> See Partha Chatterjee (1998).

the modern space always brings with it the potential for politicized movements. Therefore, participation in movements itself describes one way of responding to modernity when it is considered an inauguration of a new mode of political citizenship. The nature of the community – origin, gender relations, distribution of power, attitude towards heterogeneity and differences – determines the agency of the individual subject. This analysis therefore simultaneously reads through configurations of the religious community and the embodiments of the subject. Major outcomes of the event can be summarized as the conflict of secular modern state with religion and with the minorities. The supremacy ascertained by Syrian Catholic Church among Kerala Christianities and the inauguration of a new political subjectivity for the minority/Christian subject appeared as the postscripts to the grand narrative of minority politics. The analysis begins with the examination of the manifestation of the sacred inside the secular institutions.

Before exploring how the ideas of the sacred actualize in modern political systems, it is important to briefly explain the different ways in which the idea of the secular is conceived in modern political philosophy. As it has been identified, predominantly in non-western contexts, the community remains one of the integral parts of political ideologies. Early conceptualization on the secularization of the society suggested the separation of church and state and the end of moral authority of religious institutions over political life of the individual. Theoretical postulates on secularism have considered empirical experiences from different geopolitical locations where religion has been at stake within the discourse of modernity. They have conceptualized the idea of secularization as privatization of religion, decline of religion in public sphere, or equal treatment of religion. Precisely, within the discourses of modern liberal democracy, religion tends to be categorized as a nonmodern category.

It has been already explained that within the imaginaries of modernity, “return” of religion is not the return per se, for religion has never been relegated to the private sphere. The theory the decline of religion in public as the historical condition of modernity envisaged in a linear progression of time is precisely a myth.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, it would be a historical fallacy to consider public religion as remnants of premodern past “that should ideally be concerned to the private sphere” (Mayer and Moores 2006: 6). By implication, this points to the many crises of secularism and the idea of modernity. This, in fact, reflects one of the dilemmas regarding the political secularism in India when it associates with western rationalism and “public reasons formulated in non-religious terms” (Bhargava 2011: 7). This dilemma tends to trigger tensions between faith and secularism, which possibly trivialize faith, as Rajeev Bhargava points out. When secularism appeared as a constitutional promise in India, the question of belief and populace of religious affiliations remained difficult to be accommodated. What followed is the politicization of religious/faith communities where public religions emerged in response to the de-politicization of the private sphere. The trajectory of the current politics in India is symptomatic of the politicization of a believing public into conformist and essentialized categories. Brahminical values taken up by a larger Hindu community can be seen as an example of this. Religion in public has led to questions regarding the legitimacy of a believing community within the secular modern state. Thus, this question of legitimacy and the kind of affiliation community maintains with the secular state are interconnected. Arguably, believing subject’s position in a secular democracy is debatable since its existence is conditional on the other: the imagined rational individual whose subjectivity cannot be contained in the religious sphere. These discourses become important in view of the fact that the new Christian subject of modern state proposed by

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<sup>32</sup> This argument has been discussed from different vantage points. See Talal Asad (2003), Jose Casanova (1994), Mahmood Mamdani (2004), and Saba Mahmood (2015).

the historical event of *Vimochana Samaram* is part of the secular national community but simultaneously immune to it.

According to Roberto Esposito, the “modern subject who enjoys civil and political rights is itself an attempt to attain immunity from the contagion of the possibility of community” (Campbell 2006: 4-5). This works at two levels: one with the so-called material domain of the juridical, legal, and constitutional rights and duties that come with the governmental systems, and the other that directly operates in the private sphere of the religion. The biopolitical powers of the church operate in this spectrum where the religious subject is caught in the nexus of community affiliations of the nation-state as well as religion. The Catholic Church’s stance in matters related to birth control, euthanasia, etc. testifies this point since religious statutes and constitutional prerogatives often find themselves at loggerheads over such issues. To understand the nuances of this problematic, it is important to examine the subject in its mediations through the community. How the subject is emanated from the discourses that form community is decisive in this process. Here, the religious subject at stake is entangled in a series of events that had been defined as a “crisis” and that seems to be the very moment of the realization of the self. In this case, the crisis was the secular communist government that supposedly failed to acknowledge the religious sentiments of its subjects.

Within the larger Catholic Christian community, *Vimochana Samaram* was projected as an incident of great magnitude which had been utilized to establish the political importance of religion and the need for communitarian solidarity in issues beyond faith and religiosity. Being political thus can be immediately translated as being a legitimate Christian. Hence, the incident seems to signal the ontological completeness of

the religious subject. This emphasized the significance of the community as a moralizing force defining the political subjectivity of a Christian.

Hence, the communist government, which was primarily tagged as “anti-religious” and “atheist” and therefore detrimental to religious freedom, became easily labelled as illegitimate by the religious communities. Accordingly, Christianity has to reorient itself as a political category to embody a new subjectivity within the secular nation-state. In that sense, they were showing their association with both the patriarchal systems: the state and the Church. Arguably, the secular modern nation-state engendered this transformation of the religious subject into a political category and the idea of the citizen subject is foundational in it. Thus, being part of a community can be translated into being “rational” than “religious.” In other words, it is not belief that makes a legitimate believing subject, but it is the ability of the believing subject to transcend belief for the sake of the community.

In the public sphere, *Vimochana Samaram* was one of the largest movements with enormous support from the working class from both Christians and Nairs of Kerala. The event was a spectacle of different religious-caste-communities, also exhorting the Kerala Christian populations from different sects to partake in it. For Christian communities, the fight against the government was articulated in the language of identity assertions and therefore it is for upholding minority rights. For them, being part of massive rallies and public agitations appealed to their religious ardour and heralded the means of asserting loyalty to the Church. Sara Joseph, the noted Malayalam writer, in her novel *Alahayude Penmakal* poignantly narrates how certain marginalized groups within the church, who knew nothing about either communists nor the reasons for the agitations, were summoned and edified to parade against the “cursed communists” (S. Joseph 2010: 52-63). For the

lower strata of Catholic Church, the protest had been projected as a movement of the peasants, of the people, and regarding the issues of the faithful.

This enormous support for the struggle seems to be the result of the manipulative and strategic manoeuvring of belief instilled with community consciousness. The name given to the struggle itself is self-explanatory in this respect. The significations of the term *Vimochanam* (liberation), thoughtfully employed by Catholic Church who was the brains of the movement, have to be pinpointed here. In the discourse of liberation theology “liberation” suggests a theological outlook inclusive of social and cultural aspects of individual and community. Hence, it advocates a discourse of contextual theology instead of dogmatic Christianity.

In that sense, the expression also criticizes the normative certainty and universalism of Christianity. Hence, liberation addresses the subaltern perspectives on Christian beliefs and political overtones of communist ideology. Thus, it also challenged the moral rationale of the communist party. The expression *vimochana samaram* clearly points to this aspect that the Church wanted to project among its people. Hence, the use of the term *vimochanam* against a communist government signifies both the invalidation of liberation without religion and the illegitimacy of a secular government in a religiously oriented society. The fact that marginalized Christian communities like Dalit Christians or Latin Christians of Central Kerala are subject to categorical exclusion is no more a veiled reality. They are “others” within and this exclusion finds justification in this rhetoric of minority politics that imagine a pan-Christian sentiment. In short, if one has to be legitimately part of the community, s/he must be religiously rational.

In contemporary debates, strikingly, this mobilization became an exclusive memory of the Roman Catholic Church negating the influence and population of other

Christians or that of the Nair community. *Vimochana Samaram* is also marked by the entry of Catholic Church to the sphere of electoral politics and its subsequent transformation as one of the most influential religious communities in modern Kerala. The common sense on Christians of Kerala in the public sphere, derived much from the spectacle presented by the *Vimochana Samaram*. This instant visibility of the Catholic Church made their entry into representative spaces in media and popular culture easier and they were to become the dominant and mostly exclusive representation of Christianity, particularly in popular Malayalam cinema. The visual presence of Roman Catholicism was so influential to inculcate homogeneous and stereotypical symbols to represent “the Kerala Christianity.” For instance, it is by erasing subaltern, indigenous, and oriental Christian traditions of Kerala that Roman Catholicism introduced the idea of ecclesiastic structure which is essentially modelled on celibate masculinity. While celibacy is still not considered mandatory in many Christian Churches in Kerala, the priests in Malayalam cinema/visual media texts are habitually modelled on the prototype of the celibate masculine figure. In order to understand the larger implications of this pattern, it has to be studied along with the body politic of heteronormative masculinity that projected the ascetic male figure as the embodiment of the ideal national male within the cinematic imagination.<sup>33</sup> It looks at the politics of the archetypal figure of Christian magician priest in popular cinema and television and the ways in which they represent this ascetic ideal.

Therefore, from the analysis, it can be argued that the discursive platform of political modernity proposed by the event of *Vimochana Samaram* necessitated the articulation of essentially “rational modern subject” of religion. This political modernity contradicted the emancipatory possibilities of the incipient public sphere and the terrain

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<sup>33</sup> See Chapter four for a more detailed analysis on this.

of subversive discourses in that, the rational subject within Christianity was modelled on the hegemonic subjectivity of Syrian Christians. Moreover, in practice, Syrian Christians' experience of modernity had not moved beyond economic and infrastructural changes, and the imagination of this "rational" subject seems to be a historical farce. Consequently, the "enlightened" subject came into existence by repressive strategies curbing the Dalit/subaltern self that is subsumed under the tag of nonmodern. At stake here is the question of "belief." As belief and political subjectivity tend to cancel out each other, belief remains outside the discourse of community exemplified in *Vimochana Samaram*. The crucial point is that historically subaltern subjects of the religion like Dalit Christians' affiliation to the religion is rooted predominantly and most often exclusively on belief than on a sense of the community. The deductive argument made here is that the subaltern subjects of Christianity fail to become legitimate part of the Christian community in Kerala which constitutes the dominant Syrian Christian Episcopal Churches. However, the importance belief has in their experience of Christianity is often unrecognized and misinterpreted. In the dominant discourse, their faith tends to be translated as passive submission and belief without the reasoning of the knowing subject. They have been represented as mass converts who lack insight and knowledge of religion. They simply "believe." This is against the Dalit experiences of conversion and history wherein conversion into Christianity had been principally a matter of subjective reasoning and agentive power. In fact, the missionaries merely supported them in a later point of time as T. M. Yesudasan observes (2016: 19). Thus, the stigma on Dalits in Syrian Christian Churches as passive receivers turns out to be both ahistorical and apolitical.

Thus, in the dominant imagination, the Dalit subject cannot be the modern rational subject of the religious community precisely because they symbolize lack and incompleteness. In this conceptualization, they are just crowd without essence and



passive receivers of religious ferment. The people who can never own Syrian Christian historicity and tradition would “naturally” be missing from the paradigm of the political category of Christianity. It can well be argued that religion, in this context, acts best as an ideology of community than practice of faith. The significations of belief, therefore, elude conventional lexicon, which posits belief as a binary to the secular, and requires other analytical models.

Ashish Nandy posits that religion, as it appears in the current South Asian history, is split into faith and ideology, where faith is a way of life and ideology is organized religion that can be identifiable with a body of texts (see G. Viswanathan 1998: 174). Further, this faith is defined as “tradition which is definitely non-monolithic and operationally plural” (qtd. in G. Viswanathan 1998: 174). This non-monolithic and plural tradition can have inextricable links with concepts on individual autonomy, articulation of the self, and the installation of an idea of the sacred. Community politics can facilitate this split of conceptualizing religion around ideology and belief. The following section would look at this functionalist aspect of community politics to illuminate how belief itself can emerge as a category to frame modern forms of associational entitlements.

### **Belief and Identity**

The advent of Charismatic movements<sup>34</sup> and new religious groups of Christianity in recent decades requires analysis in the light of the changing space of belief in traditional Christian communities. What is peculiar about new religious movements in

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<sup>34</sup> Charismatic Christian communities are Christian faith communities that give importance to miracles, spiritual gifts, and individual experience of Holy Spirit (as they call it) as opposed to the doctrinal Christian belief, ritualistic traditions, and practices of Episcopal churches. They started to appear in the latter half of nineteenth century and currently have a sizable membership dispersed over different communities all over the world. The phenomenon is collectively known as Charismatic movements. Pentecostalism and protestant Churches are Charismatic in nature but there are also numerous unaffiliated Charismatic communities functional today.

Christianity is the paramount importance given to belief and expression of belief than lineage. Faith appears to be the paramount qualifier that defines the follower in the Charismatic group whereas it is predominantly lineage in Episcopal Churches. In one sense, the growth of Protestant Christianity among former untouchable communities in India attests this polarization. P. Sanal Mohan, in his study on Kerala's history of slavery, has explained about the massive conversion to Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century among slave castes (2015). The move into Pentecostalism from lower caste communities has to be studied in the light of the kind of religious experience they are popular of. As it has been observed, the "most salient features [of Pentecostal Christianity] are its decentralized structure, protean adaptability, and the primacy accorded to first-person experience as against doctrine" (Roberts 2009: 119). How Christian faith intervened in the Dalit experience is a matter of historical importance elucidating the nexus of political implications of colonialism, modernity, and conversion in the individuals and community concerned. But the drain of Syrian Christians to Protestantism testifies the failure of traditional systems to contain the sphere of faith. The reasons behind the increasing interest toward Pentecostal Churches are many which differ according to place and time. Nevertheless, a common denominator of their appeal is the discontents toward ritualistic belief traditions of canonical Churches. Charismatic groups follow non-institutional and non-sacramental modes of seeking the divine and predominant position is given to "individual spiritual experience." It is held that; "Pentecostalism is better understood as multifarious movements concerned primarily with the *experience* of the working of the Holy Spirit and the *practice* of spiritual gifts" (A. Anderson 2004: 440; emphasis original). Furthermore, according to Clarke Garrett, "the remarkable expansion of Pentecostalism within Christianity demonstrates that even today

the idea of the immanence of a divine presence that can be sensorily experienced is enormously attractive” (1987: 2).

Although the emphasis on scriptural life was primordial in Pentecostalism, it is free from ritualistic and dogmatic religious field and apparently, it did not hegemonize one’s caste origins. This space seemed hospitable to the new converts who were ruthlessly discriminated and distanced from spaces of worship even after conversion. The obvious reason for this is the Syrian Christian practices of caste prejudices as Dalits, who were outside the sphere of ritual purity, had been literally distanced from the sanctified spaces of worship. In this milieu, the new space of Pentecostal belief communities seemed hospitable to the new converts. By 1990s and 2000, the Charismatic movements started to gain momentum, drawing a huge number of followers across Kerala. Majority of the newly formed Christian faith communities can be defined as Charismatic movements. Some of them are offshoots of the various schisms within the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, which later moved out as Charismatic revival groups or new Pentecostal Churches.

The primary difference between Pentecostalism and new religious movements is that Charismatic groups do not claim the status of a Church and are not formal organizations such as the numerous Pentecostal Churches across Kerala. Instead, these groups are fluid and open communities with a strong network among local, national, and international followers. Though all the Charismatic groups do not discredit the sacramental life of Episcopal Christianity, they prioritize individual experience or “individual salvation.” With increasing followers from Syrian Christian Churches, they grow into attaining a certain level of autonomy and become structured system but refrain from formalizing the faith; in the structure, Charismatic leadership based on preaching is

paramount. They maintain online networks, prayer fellowships, conduct annual meetings, *Rogashantishushroosha* (faith healing service), and find independent sources of income. Unlike faith communities that grow under the leadership of a divine figure, these communities are peculiar to Christianity, different from its Hindu counterpart that has opened up new avenues of religious behaviours especially in South India in the past few decades.<sup>35</sup>

The following section examines the movements to understand the way they imagine the believing subject within. In one sense, the religious experience of the groups focuses on an imagined rational/secularized being who would become heir to the “true” spirit of Christianity legitimated through personal experiences. Thinking along this line, it can be argued that belief as a choice exists only outside the structure of the community. Inside a traditional religious community, faith seems to be part of the collective unconscious that binds the impossible community together. Hence, conceptually the sacred space of faith and the political category of the community tend to remain two intercepting entities. Paradoxically, this sphere of heterogeneous identities invokes the idea of the sacred as well as that of the secular, while the political community is an exclusive category of sectarian thoughts. These faith communities occupy a fluid space that suspends the divide between the sacred and the secular. This dissolution of the sacred-secular binary also bears testimony to the inadequacy of the language of secular modernity which generates such binaries that cannot contain identities arising from the pathologies of political imagination. Further, this elucidates how perceptions on religious and ethnic identity are encoded in the cultural unconscious to form the substratum of essentialized concepts on religion and belief. Belief seems to possess a life of its own

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<sup>35</sup> Godman phenomenon attracting huge numbers of followers in twentieth century has to be remembered here. Popular figures of Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amrithanandamayi are best examples of this phenomenon.

outside the hegemonic structures, and therefore, it can be taken as an empirical category in contrast with dominant forms of religions.

In brief, belief destabilizes the hegemonizing role of the community over the individual. Nevertheless, one must not take belief engendered by subjective agency as a sovereign realm immune to communitarian bonds. Belief insinuates both community and subjective agency which is embedded in social, cultural, and political implications. This contingency of belief thus destabilizes the dominant notions about religion and normative assumptions about community. In this way, religion becomes part of the political sphere while belief remains to be an empirical category and connected with the population. When considered as a category that gives visibility to the subaltern consciousness and memory, belief can become a radical category. By drawing from these conceptual terrains, this section tries to understand belief as a way independent of established religiosity and how it can also become a political category in itself. A telling example of an organized rational community of belief designed for social emancipation is the community of *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) formed in early twentieth century Travancore. In 1910 Poykayil Yohannan (later known as Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan and Poykayil Appachan), introduced a new community of believers, which was subsequently named as *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* for Dalits. It can be considered as an instance of Dalit resistance against the oppressive religious systems. PRDS did not affiliate itself to any of Hindu or Christian religious order but offered critical interpretations of Christianity in view of their contextual significance pertaining to Dalit lifeworld (Mohan 2006: 47). This proposed an alternative to dogmatic and hegemonic religious ideologies of both Syrian Christian and Hindu communities. The movement underlined the failure of existing religions in addressing the question of marginality and social stigmas associated with the caste system. Though there is no

comparison with PRDS and Charismatic movements within Syrian Christian Churches, the prominence given to belief requires thorough examination. In both cases, the sphere of faith that had been hitherto relegated to the private sphere now seems to be an important terrain of articulations and re-fashioning of the self.

The recently formed evangelical wings of many Syrian Christian Churches once again affirm the fact that the functional category of belief remains outside establishments and it can become a political category that registers difference within. The outward flow of the faithful has been a crucial issue for the institutional Churches and there have been attempts to ban such divergent movements. The appearance of religious television channels also can be taken as responses to the questions of evangelism, which the Syrian Churches required in the face of the increasing number of faithful who were embracing various Pentecostal and new religious evangelical movements, leading to eventual mass conversion to Pentecostalism. *Shalom* television is the first television channel exclusively started for Christian religious programmes (2005), which began as a small programme block in the channel *Asianet* in 1998. *Power Vision* began in 2006 with the mission statement, “Communicating the message of God’s love, compassion and mercy through the Lord Jesus Christ to the nations by sharing the Word of God, presenting Biblically sound, culturally appropriate and attractive programs to improve the character of people and quality of life of our nation through mass media.”<sup>36</sup> *Harvest TV*, which began in 2007 claims; “The vision of Harvest TV is to make sure that the Gospel of Jesus Christ reaches every home, every ethnic group and every land.”<sup>37</sup> The latest in this genre is *Athmeeya Yathra*, started in 2011 by K. P. Yohannan, who was an evangelist and founder of Believer’s Church, the newly formed Episcopal Church.

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<sup>36</sup> [http://www.powervisiontv.com/about\\_us.php](http://www.powervisiontv.com/about_us.php)

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.harvesttv.in/8-harvest/1-harvest-television-network-private-limited>

However, the number of people attracted to these movements began to grow faster and eventually, the established Churches had to soften the take on these movements; instead, they organized their independent organs exclusively for charismatic fellowships.<sup>38</sup> The increasing number of evangelical wings and retreat centres and the working class population they have are also important here. By implication, the way working class and erstwhile slave-castes are “offered spirituality” has to be scrutinized in view of the politics of hegemonic relations within Church. T. M. Yesudasan’s observation is pertinent in this regard. He expresses his suspicion about the revival fellowships in the dioceses of CSI, which has the largest population of lower caste converts. To quote him:

Aren’t the renewal meetings organized by the churches actually about gilding of the gospel and thereof tranquillizing effect upon the Dalits? It would not be wrong to view with suspicion those revival programmes which shower spirituality while no alterations are made at all in the property relations within the diocese or the sharing of power, opportunities, and resources therein. (my trans; Yesudasan 2016: 29-30)

The idea of revival and spirituality in the Church, therefore, has definite caste-community politics manifested in the hegemonic relationships within. It is in this context that the numerous folk traditions still in practice in Syrian Christian churches become relevant in view of the element of sensory experience they provide. These folk traditions call for a nuanced reading because the sensory experience of the divine in this mode most often

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<sup>38</sup> Kerala Catholic Charismatic Renewal Service (started functioning in Kerala in 2004) is an example of this trend. Similar to this, Maramon convention annually coordinated by Marthoma Church on the shores of Pampa, permanent retreat centres situated in many parts of Kerala run by catholic church are further examples. The pioneer and the most popular among them are the divine retreat centre (DRC) near Muringoor run by the Catholic Church. Among these movements, the two Syrian Churches the Jacobite Syrian and Malankara Orthodox Syrian are still reluctant to accept demands from the followers and the Orthodox Church have attempted to anathemize membership to these “prayer fellowships.”

tends to surpass the institutional stipulations of dogmatic religion. Moreover, these practices seem to be rooted in regional idiosyncrasies of faith traditions than doctrinal supremacy of the Episcopal Church. Moreover, folk traditions are vital in the sphere of Christian popular piety.<sup>39</sup> The experience of supernatural through miracle is primary in this context. The tangible experiences of the sacred specific to Charismatic as well as Pentecostal faith reflect elements of popular piety in this sense. The experience of faith through miracles is primordial in both the new religious movements and popular Christianity. In contrast to institutional Christianity, popular Christianity focuses more on “earthly” life and well-being of the people. Here, it is the event of miracle believed to have happened, defines legitimacy. Popular beliefs largely remain “beliefs among people” and it appears that “people” is the reference point and locus of belief as against the ecclesiastical domination in the Syrian Christian Church. Thus, popular piety also evades categorizations as it is neither consistent nor repetitious in nature. The attraction of non-Christian public to innumerable folk practices and to pilgrimage centres underlines this aspect of the sacred.

It can be argued that the emergence of non-canonical, neo-Christian faith communities today can be considered as affective belief traditions which are antithetical to the hegemonic forms of Syrian Christian religiosity. Thus, the very existence of a new community that is often held an alternative community should not be conceived as an aberration from the linear history<sup>40</sup>; instead, it refers to a history of its own and institutes a self-referential paradigm. The demonizing of certain beliefs and valorization of others

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<sup>39</sup> It has to be noted that, the practice of attributing sacredness to things that are not necessarily part of Christian eschatology is prevalent among Christianity across the globe. Thus “holy objects” in both popular piety and Church ranges from relics of saints to inanimate objects like stone, water, photographs, figurines etc.

<sup>40</sup> By citing from the historiography of Church of South India (CSI), T. M. Yesudasan has elucidated the need to look at mission history in Kerala as a polyphonic narrative with multiple geneses. According to him, the attempt to write Church history as a linear narrative is a project of Syrian Christian hegemony so as to downplay and erase Dalit assertions and subjectivity from history (Yesudasan 2016: 21).



can be better understood from this vantage point. Thus, I would contend that the new Christian movements can be taken as an instance and a metaphor to locate the fissures in narratives on Christianity in Kerala.

Precisely, when coming to Christian representations at large, binaries are inadequate to contain the references different Christianities make within. Study of contemporary cultural imaginations, therefore, requires structures that look at the differences emanating from ideological as well as experiential underpinnings of religious behaviours. Observably, the Christian identity in the sphere of popular imagination is shaped by the configurations of community affiliations, religiosity, and myths and stigmas ensuing from it. Nevertheless, this should not be taken as a process insulated from the conceptualizations on modernity. Rather, the religious identity of Christians and the idea of community as such are predicated on the ideological apparatuses of modernity. Furthermore, being the religion of the colonial West, Christianity, by and large, carries the label of a modern religion. But Christianity's self-image as a modern religion and the rhetoric of modernity in the cultural public sphere have different manifestations. The analysis of popular publics begins from this dichotomy of images by considering the different aspects of the representational politics in question. And the following section attempts to excavate the trajectories of Christianities within the ambit of the popular.

### **The Legacy of Muttathu Varkey and the Genre of Popular in Malayalam**

Muttathu Varkey<sup>41</sup> inaugurated a new literary culture in modern Malayalam with the genre of popular fiction which is the first of its kind in Malayalam literary history and he is known as the forerunner of Malayalam popular fiction. It is in Varkey's novels that

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<sup>41</sup> Muttathu Varkey (1913-1989), was a Malayalam writer who pioneered the genre of *Janapriya Sahithyam* or popular fiction in Malayalam.

a Christian lifeworld appeared as a full-fledged narrative that contextualized the fret and fume of the period. Varkey's novels reached a wider audience than ever, at a time before cinema took over the stage. Muttathu Varkey's novels discussed the commonplace dilemmas and quotidian concerns of Christian family and morality. Many of them were set in rural backgrounds and they dealt with concerns of marital morality and inequality in society. Significantly, intricacies of communities and the issue of caste did not have much space in Varkey's novels. They either reciprocated the mainstream unconscious on caste or simply refuted the gravity of caste politics in the society. The observation made by M. R. Anilkumar is relevant here. According to him;

In representing the hopes, desires and experiential-worlds of a neo-literate society, the literary-realists, socialist-realists, modernists and chroniclers of elite lifeworlds belonging to the post-land reforms literary scene were equally indolent. The cultural interventions which popular writers like Muttathu Varkey made was about introducing and cementing the organic lifeworlds in Malayalam literature of a group of people who had been (historically) denied of language, cultural life and knowledge and who did not get adequate visibility in Kerala's public sphere – the Christian middle class and the subalterns. (my trans.; M. R. Anilkumar 2014: 84)

The cultural landscape of Varkey's novels is central Travancore and they featured the aspirations of the Christian community amidst the changing social and political milieu of the region. The significant event of the time, the Malabar migration of Syrian Christians, figures in many literary texts in this period. In general, the major themes of migration novels are the relationship of land and human being. Often, these narratives picture the bravery (or miserable failures) of migrants against the odds that the new land posed to them in the forms of adverse climate, natural calamities, epidemics, and survival in the

wilderness. Tellingly, when Varkey wrote about migration, he did not venture to portray migrant life in such language of magnificent glory or epic failure; instead, he talked about the social, cultural, and economic background that forced them to migrate to an unknown land (A. G. Sreekumar 2013: 48).

In the literary scene, the influence of Muttathu Varkey's novels was such that the popular novel genre was soon called as *painkili*, named after his first novel *Padatha Painkili*,<sup>42</sup> which was an instant hit. Elavunkal Joseph Philip (1926-1982), whose pen name was Kanam E. J., was another prominent popular fiction writer of this genre. Nevertheless, it is Varkey who pioneered and popularized the genre to have many genealogies of Christian presence in the popular. The novels instigated many debates on the literary culture of modern Malayalam as well as reading habits of newly formed literary public formed around the period. Noticeably Varkey's characters spoke in Travancore Syrian Christian dialect, unlike the mainstream literature in Malayalam. No wonder that many of his contemporaries and modernists critiqued Muttathu Varkey's novels for their "substandard" language and the "non-literariness" of subject matter. Nonetheless, the quotidian experiences that were given expressions in his novels had far-reaching appeal and are instrumental in inculcating a reading culture in communities of people who are otherwise distanced from the literary ideals of modernists.

In the contemporary literary scene of Malayalam, Muttathu Varkey's position in the history of Malayalam reading public is now amply illustrated by the fact that one of the most prestigious awards in Malayalam literature is instituted after him and is received by mainstream writers. Abraham Mathew, one of the renowned short story writers in

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<sup>42</sup> The term began to be used in this sense after the publication of the novel *Padatha Painkili* (1955) by Muttathu Varkey. Literal meaning of *Painkili* is singing bird. Earlier it had been used as a belittling term to demarcate popular fiction but eventually it became the term widely used to suggest "inferior" taste, quality, and value in various cultural contexts.

Malayalam, sums up the difference between Muttathu Varkey and other mainstream writers by his simple observation on the language used in both writings. In doing so, Abraham Mathew tries to explain the disparity of cultural imaginations in them in terms of language, gender relations, the political geography of the communities, and their cultural implications. To quote him; “when Thankachan calls for Shoshamma (by her name) on the shores of Manimalayaar, the response would be a firm and straight-to-the-face ‘*ennatha?*’ When the besotted Unni calls similarly for Sreedevi from the shores of Bharathapuzha, the response would be a coy ‘*enthe?*’ uttered in bowed modesty” (my trans.; A. Mathew 2015: 280).<sup>43</sup>

Here, Abraham Mathew implies the many aspects of Syrian Christian and suggestively upper caste Hindu life worlds. The obvious one is that of the image of the bold Syrian Christian woman in contrast to the modest woman of Nair and Namboodiri caste which points to social transformation of different kinds. Clearly, the agency of women manifested in her expressions is a marker of social mobility and this assertive femininity has connections to their religious identity. This includes Syrian Christian’s access to the colonial education system, socialization within the church, the decline or absence of certain social taboos, and various migration patterns within the community. Thus, the semiotic analysis points to liberating social changes accessible to Syrian Christians in particular owing to their religious and social identity. In the sphere of cultural imaginations at large, assertive femininity is often presented as the “other” of “good woman” who is represented as yielding, tolerant, and docile bodies. In line with this idea, cultural imaginations in Malayalam present Christian woman as the embodiment of “bad woman” and this perception runs through mainstream as well as

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<sup>43</sup> The words *ennatha* and *enthe* are regional, dialectic variants of Malayalam to ask “What is it?” *Ennatha* is the more assertive address and is specific to south Kerala and especially Syrian Christian dominated regions. *Enthe* connotes submissive femininity and politeness and is peculiar to *Valluvanadan* dialect common among upper caste Hindus of central Kerala.

popular imaginations on them, where “loose women” categorically become Christian. Equally important is the language politics of Malayalam literature. Here, it has to be remembered that Bharathappuzha,<sup>44</sup> Sreedevi, and Unni are canonical nouns for places and characters in mainstream literature. While Thankachan-Shoshamma’s language has always been one of the inferior dialects of Malayalam, the Valluvanadan dialect of Sreedevi and Unni becomes the “authentic” Malayalam in mainstream literature. The greatest proponent of this is the veteran author and screenwriter in Malayalam M. T. Vasudevan Nair, whose dialect seems to have been hegemonized through Malayalam cinematic imagination. Here, Abraham Mathew triggers questions on the politics of representation, politics of language, and spaces of marginal and minority identity within mainstream cultural imaginations.

Nonetheless, in the next statement, the author Abraham Mathew lapses into a Freudian slip, where he says:

There was a time in Malayalam literature when the very names like Soshamma and Thankachan suggested *Avashachristianikal*.<sup>45</sup> Their gestures of love would not qualify to be out of pining. Muttathu Varkey quarrelled with that theory of class-segregation which would exclusively ascribe certain stereotypical labours to Christians such as logging or felling of forests or rolling rubber sheets. (my trans.; A. Mathew 2015: 280)

Here, though Mathew makes a point about cultural stigmatization on Christians at large, he also makes a tacit difference between different Christian communities, obviously pointing to the Syrian Christian hegemony and its other. This difference is adequately

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<sup>44</sup> A River in Kerala.

<sup>45</sup> Term indicates to poor and socially deprived Christians coming from downtrodden background suggestive of late converts from Dalit communities.

communicated by the belittling term *Avashachristianikal*, which literary means poor or weak Christians. Considering the history of Pentecostalism in Kerala, it would be important to see how Malayalam cinema marks the *Avashachristianikal*. Seemingly, in visual culture representations, Syrian Christians are ordained as the only legitimate heir of Christianity in Kerala. This design thereby renders all other Christian traditions inferior and trivial. This is obvious by the way in which Pentecostalism and new religious movements within Christianity are often ridiculed in many Malayalam films to evoke laughter or contempt. On another level, they are religious groups that evoke victimhood, patronization, and sympathy, which surface when the character visibly carries an underprivileged social space. For instance, in the movie *Achanurangatha Veedu* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2006),<sup>46</sup> the prayer hall in which we find the lead male character, the father of the victim of a gang rape, carries layers of meanings alluding to many politics associated with the new wave religious experience and marginal-minority identities. Aberrations are never part of the normal and thus the divergent spiritual/religious behaviour cannot form the mainstream. Canonically they are outside the mainstream imagination and are categorically erased from within. The “aberrant” expressions are attached to subjugated selves and they are prone to be mocked, trivialized, or villainized in the semiotics of Malayalam Cinema. This subject, capable of disrupting and deconstructing the discourses on marginality, humiliation, and religious signification lies outside the performative sphere of the “normal” in popular cinema.

Majority of early Malayalam films with identifiable Christian representations were adaptations of Muttathu Varkey or were inspired by the themes he discussed. A few films took stories from Kanam E. J., who belonged to the same genre. It can be stated that

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<sup>46</sup>*Achanurangatha Veedu* (2006) portrays a gang rape victim and the plight of her family after the incident, alluding to a rape victim’s real life experience in Kerala.

the format of the religious-popular in early Malayalam cinema comes largely from popular novels of the time. *Kottayam Kunjachan* (Dir. T. S. Suresh Babu, 1990), based on Varkey's novel of the same title *Kottayam Kunjachan*, was the last one to be made into a movie. Ironically, it foreclosed the genre and opened a new mode of Christian caricature in Malayalam popular cinema post-1990s.

It remained a prototypical masculine figure exemplified in the masculine image of the popular actor Mammooty to be followed by many others, to create a different trajectory altogether. Mammooty's *Kunjachan*, the new masculine figure embodied in the language of the patriarchal moral order,<sup>47</sup> paved way for the birth of the modern Christian male that emerges in Malayalam cinema after the 1990s and 2000. The genealogy of Malayalam cinema post-1990s has to be examined against the background of these representative politics. Although this new male character underwent a restructuring of subjectivity to fit into the norms of cinematic modernity, the stereotypical images of them as "rubber planters" left them vulnerable to the critique of modernist imaginations of Kerala mainly after the popularization of the "Kerala model" in development discourse. Christians were either excluded from the imaginations of modernity or they were the excesses thereof which made them prone to mutilated imageries evoking laughter and fear. Malayalam cinema seems to cater to this common sense on Christianity, which assigns roles to validate their minority/other identity against the grand narratives of modernity and political history. The next chapter examines Malayalam cinema after 1990s to elucidate the ways in which Christian subjectivity is weaved within the narratives on modernity experiences of the region.

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<sup>47</sup> For a detailed discussion see Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella (2006: 175-177).

The humorous short story by Shihabudeen Poythumkadavu titled *Maya Charithram*<sup>48</sup> touches on this very common sense on Christian subjectivity, which I think would preface the analysis in an adequately important way. The story, arguably, is emblematic of the dominant perceptions about Christian subjectivity and the problems of the frameworks in which the Christian identity is structured in contemporary Kerala. Written in the tone of blatant satire and unfolded as a historical narrative, it is about the aged Geevarghese mash, an affluent Syrian Christian male hailing from Travancore and his paid listener. The character Geevarghese mash takes great pleasure in talking and he actually gives a commentary on the history of modern Kerala as he re-lives his past and shares his thoughts with his paid listener. He is enthusiastically loquacious about his “influence” in the corridors of power. As his narration progresses, the reader and the paid listener of Geevarghese mash are surprised to see the phenomenal “historical” importance of the man. In his autobiographical monologue, Geevarghese mash is part of each and every event in the making of modern Kerala. He nostalgically recalls the freedom struggle, the spread of communism, Naxalite movements of the 1970s, the EMS government, and the social justice movements. As the story proceeds through the perspective of his listener, the readers are given the impression that the story unveiled so far, appears to be a life lived by someone else. And Geevarghese mash simply gives a voice-over to history. The story ends with a satirical question the listener would want to ask but he could not, which is, “After all, my master, where do *you* stand in this history?” (Poythumkadavu 2017: 19; emphasis added)

The story crafted in the first-person narrative of the paid listener succinctly addresses the skepticism on Christian self in contemporary Kerala. Here we have a Travancore Syrian Christian male with an “invisible” presence in the itinerary of Kerala

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<sup>48</sup>The word may mean both imaginary and inefaceable history.



on its way to a modern state. Arguably, the layers of meaning embedded in the characterization of this masculine figure make inroads into the cultural unconscious on the “Christian presence” in Kerala. The depiction of the “absence” of this Syrian Christian male and the passive listener’s vulnerable stance pictured within the former’s lonely life in his plush apartment metaphorically alludes to two prominent identifications with Christianity in the region. The dominant masculine figure with a “voice” and his paid listener without one, thus, complicates and scrutinizes the Christian presence/absence amply explicated through the title that is suggestive of not only an illusive history but also an ineffaceable one.

This chapter engaged with two trajectories of formation of a popular Christian identity in Kerala. In the first one, the chapter analyzed the formation of a Christian community identity in Kerala public sphere. Here, the chapter explains how Christianity in modern Kerala is consolidated as Syrian Christian and its other, which is an extension of the caste politics of Syrian Christianity. Nevertheless, what is significant in the process is the way how the category of belief was used by Syrian Christian community assertions to form a legitimate rational self, erasing all other possibilities of imagining a religious self. This is problematic as histories of belief were central to Dalit Christian self-articulations and claims of history and social justice in Kerala, when the dominant Syrian Christians consolidations were largely and often exclusively on the basis of caste claims. Secondly, the chapter tries to trace the genealogies of the popular and its possibilities and perils, and the manner in which a common sense on Syrian Christian identity is constructed within. Chapter two traces the nuances of the common sense on Syrian Christian identity and their embodiments in the popular spaces of Malayalam cinema.

## Chapter Two

### Malayalam Cinema and Christian Representations

Christianity in Malayalam cinema seems to be predicated on a monolithic Syrian Christian identity while other Christian subjectivities are categorically absent. In other words, Syrian Christian hegemony and its implications in the visual world render other ways of defining Christianity impossible and invisible. Syrian Christians dominate the cinematic representation of Christian communities of Kerala and this visibility itself is political as the visible seems to be identified as the legitimate one in cinematic narrative.. And the way in which they are represented produces common sense about Christian religious identity, communitarian sensibilities, political behaviours, and so on. This chapter argues that the representability of Syrian Christians is structured and defined by the secular modern desire of hegemonic Kerala public. For this, the chapter takes up select Malayalam films from post-1990s which present a new mode of imagining self and subjectivity predicated essentially on religious identity. Academic discourses on post-1990s Indian cinema marked religion clearly as a political category, which is axiomatic in the structural and thematic rendering of film texts. The debates on *Roja* (Dir. Mani Ratnam, 1992) exemplify this. Malayalam films of this period started to re-organize their minority subjectivities fundamentally as national subjects by creating a language of cultural and political stakes of the region. Christian representations engage with this language of *Culture* and *Politics* and this is illustrative of the political impasse of the secular modern state in India. This shift in representation from the existing patterns of cinematic representation is my point of departure in attempting to understand the genealogies of Christian representation in Malayalam cinema. By doing so, the chapter

analyzes the political premises within which this Christian self is established in Malayalam cinema.

Indian cinema is inextricably linked to the experiences of modernity and structures of public sphere and thereby works within the nexuses of ideological and political meanderings of the nation-state. Christianity in Malayalam cinema implies either an ideological position or a category of identity. Kerala, being a region that has nurtured many territorial imaginations and origin myths propelling an idea of “homogenous empty time” (B. Anderson 2006), produces a rationale of legitimacy for its largely hegemonic public sphere. Malayalam cinema augments this rationale by offering an archive of public memory which constructs “other” identities within the larger narrative of modernity in Kerala. This approach focuses more on the ways in which religion becomes identified as ideology and the Christian subject as an entity belonging to another ideological system. This chapter thus attempts to analyze the idioms through which notions of religious identity is structured in the grammar of popular Malayalam cinema through manipulation or taming of the “other.”

In his work “Spectacle of the Other,” Stuart Hall makes an important observation about the politics of constructing “other identities” through strategically employed binaries. Using the example of photographic representation of black athletes in American media, Hall observes:

[P]eople who are in any way significantly different from the majority ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ are frequently exposed to [a] binary [to be both villains and heroes] of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/ compelling-because-

strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to be both things at the same time! (Hall 1997: 229)

The framework where one finds the conventional stereotype of the good versus bad constituting diametrically opposite entities seems to be inept to explain the permutations of modern identity. That is the reason why they are, at the same time, both villains and heroes. To think about the conditions within which this abstraction functions, one must pay attention to the way identities are formed inside such mediations. The danger involved in such an enterprise is the way identity pre-supposes a Cartesian self which renders the process of *becoming* as qualitative rather than a discursive one. In dominant imagination, this process is significant in earning new respectability for the subordinated. This cannot be cut down to mimicry or imitation; rather it involves a re-structuring of the self so as to escape the contagion of exclusionary politics. In popular spaces, this seems to be the mode of representing the “other.”

In the same text, Hall poses the question, “why is ‘otherness’ so compelling an object of representation?” (1997: 234). One way of addressing this dilemma is to consider otherness as enunciations of “difference” and therefore it becomes a political category. In heterogeneous religious environment, the majority-minority frame always poses binaries based on difference that reproduces claims of legitimacy and idioms of political dissent. When political legitimacy is predicated on religious identity and nationalism is imagined in the language of faith and devotion, difference stands against nationalist imaginaries. Consequently, the minority religious identities emerging from a paradigm of differential ontology seem to be conditioned by and modelled on populist and majoritarian ideals.

Judith Butler, in her significant work *Gender Trouble*, argues that subjectivities are constituted performatively (2007). Butler explains the idea of performative

subjectivity when she tries to unmake the perception that gender is given by and innate in nature. According to Butler, gender is a performance to be able to fit into “the identity it is purported to be” (2007: 34). This implies that gender is not performed by the subject; rather subject is performatively created and instead of condemning subject as the cause of discourse, it is explained that subject is the effect of discourse (Salih 2015: 64-65).

Performativity, when used as a frame to deconstruct subjectivity, is a historically and spatially determined political understanding of what constitutes a subject. That is to say that, performativity is a historically contingent process and method. This chapter attempts to understand the historical contingencies within which Christian minority subject is structured in Malayalam cinema. This visual imagination has implications in structuring minority identities in public sphere and here subjectivity is perceived not as insulated from contaminations and coercive forces but as a product of discourses that unleashes and detours ways of being.

In the sphere of representation, the notions of minor and minority identity are even more complicated since what constitutes majority also constitutes its other aesthetically and epistemologically. Minority subjectivities in a majoritarian state are emblematic of this structuration of subjectivity. Arguably, when religious identity precedes other structures of identification and defines ideas of belonging, the articulation and conceptualizations of “religious behaviours” seem problematic. Any attempt to study religious identity and behaviours attributed to religiously oriented ideological postures must be understood within the parameters of this politics. Subjectivity and identity, therefore, becomes crucial in studies pertaining to mediations of the idea of religion and religious ideologies. Religion’s a priori meaning, therefore, does not qualify itself to make any claim of “essence of religion” in this analysis (Asad 1993: 29-30).

In other words, for instance, the moral fibre, work ethics, and political dispositions of a particular community should not be considered idiosyncratic to forms or notions of community. Considering the essentialist approach the studies on religious community tend to subscribe to, it could be argued that what community *is* does not help to arrive at a definition of community as such. But rather, what is performatively constructed defines and historicizes the self as well as its other. As Stuart Hall emphasizes, the other is imperative for meaning (Hall 1997: 236). However, this performative subject is not a dual which, on the one hand is the self-conscious subject who “performs” what s/he ought to be, and on the other embodies the real. Butler’s argument on performativity suggests that “it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (2007: 185). Precisely, the real is a deceptive expression and subjectivities have the potential to move in unpremeditated ways to disrupt normativity. To phrase it differently, the subject is at the same time a product of the nexus of power relation and is also capable of expelling the same. In short, the performative subject shows that it cannot be simplified to theatricality. On the contrary, performativity indicates the fragility of subjectivity and the contingency of identities. Specifically, the binaries of good and bad essentially emerge from the vantage point where subjectivity is conceptualized as an end than as an event.

Of particular importance in the discourse of performative subjectivity is the way the “socially peripheral is often symbolically centred” (qtd. in Hall 1997: 237) ultimately to facilitate legitimation of dominance and the nexus of power. This crucial aspect of modern identities has been an important terrain of discourses in studies on feminism, ethnicity, and identity politics. In this discussion of Christianities in Kerala, the metaphor of binaries seems to be effective to unveil the ways in which “us” is differentiated from “them.” The thoughts on “self” in this vein seek to unmake the archetypes associated with

Christians and Christianities in Kerala that is composed of heterogeneous communities of Syrian Christians, Dalit Christians, Evangelical Groups, Pentecostal Communes, etc.

Through the analysis, this chapter attempts to examine the political premises within which minority subjectivity is performed within the rhetoric of modernity.

Cinemas of India intervene and interpret the cultural politics pertaining to religion and identity which has material and symbolic manifestations. Being the offshoot of technological modernity in the region, cinema has to be comprehended against the various discourses it facilitates. In this analysis, I have analyzed cinema as both a platform where these discourses are embodied and also how the “contemporary” becomes significant in films. Such an enquiry is valid since cinema is a medium that borrows from other texts in different modalities and at the same time invests in other media. This renders the experience of modernity as predominantly an experience of spectacle, essentially coming out of the visual experience of the subject. A simple example of this would be the recent film *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (Dir. R. S. Vimal, 2015) which was a huge box-office success. In the biographical movie inspired by the life story of Moideen and Kanchanamala set in 1960-70s Kerala, Unni Moideen Sahib, the father of the protagonist Moideen is represented quite “convincingly” as a conservative, bearded, heavily built masculine figure in tune with the Muslim masculinity representations of post-1990s Indian cinema. By this time period, representations of Muslims predominantly had sought to confine Muslim subjectivity to essentialist categories of fundamentalists and terrorists. The irony lies in the fact that the real-life, slender-bodied Unni Moideen Sahib was active in politics and had deliberately stayed away from the stereotypical sartorial markers associated with Muslim masculine self. The director R. S. Vimal, who is said to have spent years researching the socio-political and cultural milieu specific to that region, could not yet resist employing the stereotypical Muslim masculine image in his

translation of the story into film form in 2015, at a time when Indian cinema had invented its own Muslim figure.

The films produced in Malayalam after 1990s is pivotal to this discussion as they have been producing genres of “Christian films” wherein a specific “community atmosphere” is something that determines the grammar of these genres. Furthermore, they are marked by the signs of a regional geography and a developmental / modernity dialectic specific to the narrative. That the patterned Christian portrayals started to appear at the time of evolution of stardom in Malayalam cinema is as significant as the social and political atmosphere of the time which offered a comfortable abode for such identities. The metaphors used in order to evoke this “community atmosphere” include symbolisms of cultural modernity, agrarian pasts, and images rooted in the political economy of the region. Apparently, these films portray the shift in conceptions about the economy and *Culture* of the region – the linguistically unified Kerala. It may be noted that in this period, Malayalam cinema began to feature a Christian identity along the lines of hegemonic conceptions of masculinity, family, land, and religiosity which went into the making of this particular “Christian atmosphere.” To explain further, there are a series of films which are portrayed as Christian “family films” where this pattern of narrative can be deciphered. The “religious element” in the popular, predominantly in Indian language films, seems to show two variants: one comes as ideology and the other manifests as a category of identification. Religion as an ideology, often works by pitching it as a representative strategy to demarcate the “other.” This ideological positioning of religion has always been present in the backdrop of the evolution of the idea of nation form in India. Conversely, when religious identity becomes a category of identification, it also tends to function as an ideological framework to situate the subject.



According to Malayalam film-historian Vijayakrishnan, this time period is peculiar for its divisions into genres like comedy, family-drama, and action movies as opposed to the later developments wherein one cannot possibly make such compartmentalisations to understand cinema as a semiotic system (Vijayakrishnan 2007: 200). These genres – like the comedy films of the 1990s<sup>49</sup> and the *Thampuran* films of post-2000<sup>50</sup> – had class, caste, and ideological resonances. What is important here is the way the Christian atmosphere in these films works as a subtext to the political aspirations of Kerala modernity at many levels. Christian identity becomes one of the decisive components in fabricating the grand narrative of Kerala Model that served to propel a unified and essentially caste Hindu imaginary of modern Kerala. Here, I would look at how the social and cultural critique of the Kerala Model from various ideological and theoretical terrains strengthened the very aspect they claimed to critique. These critiques, on the contrary, supplemented the agrarian imaginary of the region that has at its basis a monolithic concept of land and space. And this is severely problematic since it bolstered a romanticized idea of land on which a feudal nostalgia is predicated. This process, thereby, essentialized and re-inscribed religious as well as caste identity to complement a dominant idea of modernity.

There have been a number of top-grossing and critically acclaimed films that augmented the star persona of popular actors which was to take significant shifts during this period. The invention of the figure of Travancore Syrian Christian male as the dominant and authentic representative of Kerala Christians is the important marker of this moment. This moment indicates the departure from hitherto existing patterns of representation exemplified in films like *Puthiya Askaham Puthiya Bhoomi* (Dir. M.S.

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<sup>49</sup> See Jenny Rowena (2010).

<sup>50</sup> A series of Malayalam films produced after 2000 have feudal Hindu male protagonist who strives to reclaim the material and spiritual powers he once possessed. This is a recurrent theme in many blockbuster superstar films of which an important example being *Araam Thampuran* directed by Ranjith in 2000.

Mani, 1962) and *Aranazhika Neram* (Dir. K. S. Sethumadhavan, 1970) or the early “Christian socials”<sup>51</sup> like *Padatha Painkili* (Dir. P. Subrahmaniam, 1957), *Snehadeepam* (Dir. P. Subrahmaniam, 1962), *Christmas Rathri* (Dir. P. Subrahmaniam, 1961), etc. Christians who had been controlling the economic capital and therefore acted as the agents of modernity in the formative period of Malayalam cinema are transformed to consumers of a developmental modernity in these films. The understanding of the Christian presence delves into different dimensions of the “material conditions of production” and the “inherent semiotic heterogeneity” of cinema (Nowell-Smith 2001: 80). This is because film-making was a forte of the elite of Syrian Christians in the formative period of Malayalam cinema.<sup>52</sup> By 1990s the entrepreneur who had invested in such lucrative businesses reappeared as the protagonists of Malayalam cinema where they played the money-making class who seize capital from the industrialized modern society. Apparently, the undercurrent of many movies belonging to this category seems to present a condition carefully woven around the political economy of the region, where Christians become the agents of developmental modernity and upper caste Hindu community at its receiving end.

Kerala Christians, as appearing in cinematic imaginations over time, bear the marks of many transformations. These transformations interpret and intervene the

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<sup>51</sup> See Jenson Joseph (2012: 156).

<sup>52</sup> There was a monopoly of Christian community in the formative stage of Malayalam film industry which begins from the establishment of Udaya Pictures; the film production studio in Alappuzha in 1947 that revolutionized Malayalam film industry. Though the credit of the first film studio in Kerala goes to J. C. Daniel who established the Travancore National Pictures in 1926, it is Kunjakko’s Udaya Studios set up in 1947 that revolutionized Malayalam film industry since Udaya had emulated the then epicenter of south Indian film industry, Madras, thereby bringing a regional geography on-screen. This new wave in the cultural climate was furthered by various experimenters across the region, including his brother Chacko Punnoose known as Navodaya Appachan who was a producer, director, and entrepreneur. He established Navodaya studio (1976) and successfully experimented with modern technology in the field of film production like the cinemascope (*Thacholi Ambu*, 1978, was the first of this kind in South India also), 3D technology (*My Dear Kuttichathan* 1984, the first 3D cinema in India) and 70 MM (*Padayottam*, 1982) movies. Later other people came to industry like P. J. Cherian who produced *Nirmala*, a film which introduced the play-back system to the industry. Interestingly, Navodaya Appachan was also the creator of *Bible Ki Khaniya* (a popular Christian biblical serial, which can be viewed as the forerunner of the genre of the Christian Bhakthi serials in television) that was aired on Dooradarshan during 1993-1995.

political environment, the idea of developmental state, and rhetorics of modernity. The obfuscation of religious community and caste-community, which was peculiar to Christians of Kerala who possessed strong institutional set up that subsumed the individual sovereignty of its subjects, was crucial in this process. Christians of Kerala, when presented as a religious community or as part of hierarchical social stratification, metaphorically stood for a different worldview ideologically and ethically. The alienation and hostility towards Christianity is also derivative of the dilemmas of colonial modernity and its backlashes. When compared to other religious and caste communities in Kerala, colonial interventions were limited to the spiritual domain or belief systems – liturgy and customs mainly – of indigenous Christians. Thus modernity projects could not make inroads into the social and cultural practices of Syrian Christian community.

The institutional structures of modernity – nation form, the idea of welfare state, and citizenship – was transformed into an ideological apparatus with much ease while developmental modernity superseded other paradigms of imagining modernity. Thus developmental modernity is conceived as a conceptual framework which imparts meaning to multi-dimensional historical transformations. In cinema, modernity, seen as external and therefore colonial has also been invoked as a “narrational strategy through which the spectatorial desire for the modern is evoked only to be disappointed” (Vasudevan 1995: 2812). In Malayalam cinema, the narrational strategy made use of common sense on Christian identity – specifically Syrian Christian in the context – as a means and method to engage with experiences of modernity. Whereas Muslim was a categorical other and other downtrodden caste communities did not have associational bonds owing to stringent caste practices, Syrian Christians, with their claims of upper caste lineages and economic conditions, were better equipped to make interventions in governmental structures in feudal, colonial, and postcolonial environments.

Apparently, this category of “Christian films” illustrates a *way of life* for the Christian within the narrative and the political premise of this way of life has to be investigated carefully. The perceptions associated with being religious and at the same time modern seem to be pertinent in interpreting the streams of Kerala Christianity. The common pattern of the so-called community films can be deciphered without much effort because these films, rather clearly etched a “Christian life” with specific moral and social chores. Most of them are male-oriented movies and mostly featuring one of the super duo – Mammooty or Mohanlal or another equally prominent “star” – playing the lead role. The films *Lelam* (Dir. Joshy, 1997), *Ezhupunna Tharakan* (Dir. P. G. Viswambharan, 1999), *Naatturajavu* (Dir. Shaji Kailas, 2004), *Nasrani* (Dir. Joshy, 2007) etc. are a few of them. The protagonist habitually plays the male representative of Travancore-born-Syrian Christian. The repercussions of this construal can be categorized in terms of the historical premise from which they come and the political implications they make. To take a closer look at the characterization, the protagonist often appears as a seasoned politician (essentially right wing) who works at close quarters with the ruling class. They are shown primarily as meat-eaters, brash yet vulnerable towards family relationships, and above all absolute superheroes. The general narrative pattern of these movies consists of masculine heroes featured as planters, businessmen, and entrepreneurs who live in the corporate and industrial work atmosphere. They are vocal about their affluent Syrian Christian background and often boast of their ancestry, visibly showing signs of feudal legacies. The upper caste claims emphasized by these male characters points towards their privileged social space that take newer forms.

Thematically, a visible feature of the films discussed can be reduced to a common pattern where we find the male protagonist’s unyielding fights to retain his privileges in the face of a changing economy and by implication, the changing equations of community

relations within. The conflict of war and peace in the narrative revolves around the hero's relentless attempts to win the games he becomes part of, most often in his entrepreneurial and political ventures; and he is less likely to be bothered about existential and ethical dilemmas and the aesthetic pursuits that follow. That his conflict is very "material" and his masculine self is enmeshed in the pursuit of success differentiates this genre from earlier "Christian socials" and other contemporary films that present Christian characters as possessing different shades of submissive and subaltern masculinities.

The politics inherent in the caricaturing of a Christian subject (essentially male) derives its potential from the desire for modernity. This desire is the one that unleashes the aspiration for victory, the driving force of the narrative sprouting from a sense of non-belongingness. Apparently, the object of desire itself becomes the strategy of victory, thus a victory of his desire and a triumph over himself. The idea of modernity remains a perennially unfulfilled desire since this desire is predicated on the longing to be part of a legitimate past. In the following discussion, I try to explicate how this imaginary of modernity and the idea of the modern individual find anchorage in the language of regionalism and ways of belongingness, which is articulated in terms of values associated with land, assertive caste identity, and the political economy of the region. In doing so, this analysis tries to juxtapose this desire of the Christian subject with the paranoia inherent in the dominant, caste Hindu subject of the state.

### **Modernity and the Historiography of Belongingness**

As Syrian Christians trace a tradition in trade and commerce, the stereotypes sprouting from this inclination are manifest in movies that feature Christian characters. Thus, the male characters are stigmatized for their choice of vocations and this offers a sharp contrast to their Hindu counterparts. This difference in representative politics has to

be understood in the background of the historical conditions wherein the Hindu and Christian subjectivities have been designed in the modernity rhetoric of Malayalam cinema. For that, I would move on to the study of development narratives of Kerala and its problems that constructed the dominant image of Kerala at large. Development becomes a subject of debate in postcolonial political milieu as the nation-state has to grapple with issues of progress and growth rates geared by the nationalist development imaginary of the time. Development became a desire and an ideal of liberal democracy that has to be achieved whereas elements suggestive of premodern and colonial conditions are viewed as adulterations inside the imaginary. This often jettisons the revolutionary potentials of vernacular spaces that engender different ways of doing politics and respond to the experiences of modernity. This seems true in the case of the development aspirations of the new nation-state. The instance taken to elucidate this point is the predicament of Kerala model and the various responses towards it. The concept of welfare state is fundamental in the narrative of this developmental model and understandably the sphere of the political makes inroads into the structuring of the welfare state by an assemblage of responsible, interpellated citizens.

It is in the 1970s that Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum published its celebrated studies on growth pattern and development in Kerala. The reports claimed that Kerala's development experience is on par with the developed societies of modern West unlike that of other states of independent India. Accolades poured in and Kerala has been highlighted as the model of innovative and pragmatic development ideas and the pattern has been named "Kerala model" thereafter in literature. However, various counter-arguments came up, pointing to the flawed nature of the study owing to its reliance on statistical data and positivistic approach of analysis. A major part of the criticisms levelled against the much-debated Kerala model focused on the parameters

with which it accounted for its so-called success stories. The disempowerment of agrarian systems, issues of unjust distribution of cultivable lands, gender disparities, and the question of Dalit and Adivasi communities were some of the prominent issues that problematised the claims of Kerala model. This is evident from the criticisms in terms of the model's inadequacy in responding to issues of Dalit and Adivasi communities of the region, questions of the landless classes and the condition of women. These critiques were directed either at the validity of the parameters decisive in projecting it as a model and modern; or on the inadequacy of the measures taken up for implementing the ideals, leading to the failure of its fundamental principles at a pragmatic level.

Interestingly, criticisms as well as appraisals of Kerala model unanimously supported the importance of agrarian economy in relation to food sustainability and self-sufficiency. This appears promising as an attempt to accommodate and acknowledge the historical importance of the views from below. Even so, these claims stumbled upon the pigeonholes that the nexus of community imaginaries and land politics created in these very discussions. A significant consequence was the obfuscation of ecological discourses and agrarian crisis. Even when ecological issues come to the forefront, they are categorically allocated as "tribal issues" which nevertheless has a huge impact on tribal life and values associated with ecology. Relevant in this discussion is the way in which land became a political category in mainstream developmental discourse that renders other subjectivities – here, Christian identity – as markers of excesses of Kerala's development dialectic. This is partly due to the failure in taking into consideration the deep cultural meanings of land associated with different caste communities when assessing the economic aspect of the development model. On the one hand, responses to the economic aspect of the model interpreted it in terms of economic growth statistics while the cultural critiques apparently glossed over the cultural and feudal underpinnings

of such arguments. Significantly the apprehensions about ecological and agrarian concerns led to an impasse in understanding the specific community aspirations and psycho-emotive relationship each community maintained with land. Land has been taken as a tangible connecting link to the larger concepts of region and nation, be it the feudal ownership affiliations particular to erstwhile dominant communities, or the associational bonds that Adivasi and Dalit communities have with land. The narratives that largely focus on value models emanating from the idea of land are premised on certain perceptions and ideologies. They are of the effect of cultivating a sense of belongingness in the cultural imaginary of the region. This imaginary romanticized the agrarian past which essentializes tribal life, as well as ecological concerns.

Land has always been at the heart of Dalit and Adivasi movements of Kerala. The Kerala Land Reform Bill (1959) was considered a milestone in the development narrative of Kerala modernity. However, the demands of Dalits and Adivasis remain unresolved till date. They continue to be treated as excesses and marginal in cultural imaginaries. What is attempted in this discussion is to look at the ways in which these imaginaries become legitimized by the strategic repositioning of minority identity, served as a paradigm in the normalization of the role-plays.

The literature which romanticizes the tribal deploys stereotypical images of tribal life as “innately environmentalist” thereby rendering them prey to the strategic essentialisms of the primarily metropolitan middle class-led mobilizations as observed by Amita Baviskar (2005:165). It is the “romanticized view of traditional hill society” (Sinha et al., 70) that makes possible the imaginings of “heroic people and pristine places elsewhere, so that their own [the urban, mainstream] consumption patterns of resource use are unaffected” (Baviskar 2005: 174). This move has various versions in popular



literature mostly elaborating on the urgency and importance of protecting the people, thereby protecting the ecology. And “[t]he essential virtue of such nonmodern subjects is that they are seen to have resisted, or at least remained uncontaminated by, colonialist and modern values toward nature, which are otherwise, seen to have pervaded contemporary Indian society” (Sinha et al. 1997: 71). According to the argument running through the analysis, tribal communities are imagined as static entities and they stand in opposition to modernity experience lethal to “our land.”

Another dimension of the discourses on the ecological importance of land was recorded in the Gandhian language of “ecological prudence and frugality” in which village units have pivotal roles to play (Baviskar 2005: 164). And there also, Dalit and Adivasi communities remain outside the moral economy of the peasant. Notions on the ethics of agricultural society, concepts like self-reliance, and self-sustained individuals in fact point towards the formation of enlightened subjects who interpret modernity’s geopolitics. This implies an idea of modernity that defends “tradition and culture.” According to this:

New Traditionalism’s specific critique of Colonialism and development is accompanied by an equally specific reading of Indian tradition. Within this discourse, traditional or pre-colonial Indian society was marked by harmonious social relationships, ecologically sensitive resource use practices, and was generally far less burdened by the gender, economic and environmental exploitation which concern contemporary observer. (Sinha et al. 1997: 67)

It has been observed that “regions and communities assess themselves on a scale of accomplishments naturalized by developmental state. In these assessments, the extent and form of control over nature as recourses or heritage . . . becomes a measure of losses and

aspirations” (Gunnel and Sivaramakrishnan 2005: 5). Apprehensions about the apparent decline of the agricultural sector and the alarming rate of deforestation figure in many popular writings which addressed the ecological angle of the development story. Another set of literature examined development by looking at the dispossessed sections like tribal communities who were driven out of their “natural” homelands. The consolidation of a symbolic language of tradition which is the constellation of hegemonic values establishes itself as an important paradigm through which the indigenous elite creates a sense of past. Ascribing such symbolism to India’s traditions by valorizing the ecological diversity and rural life is recurrent in popular memory. The language of environmentalism and conservation employed by the Hindu right has an essentialized cultural geography at its core. This language of preservation was quickly assimilated into myths about India’s glorious past. Thus, there was an evident saffronisation of India’s green politics where the new green mythologies, appropriated by RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) and VHP (*Vishva Hindu Parishad*),<sup>53</sup> evolved to be an amalgamation of scientific rationality and mythical imaginations. This has various manifestations out of which places like Himalaya and Ganga become sacred and Hinduised and fundamental in the manoeuvre of cultural nationalism (Sharma 2012). Consequently “green and saffron” lore about an ideal traditional society had been at the forefront of most of the environmental movements which began to be expressed in the idioms of cultural nationalism of the BJP-led Hindutva movements (Sharma 2012).<sup>54</sup> Eventually, the environmental movements which

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<sup>53</sup> RSS (formed in 1925) and VHP (formed in 1964) are right-wing, Hindu nationalist organizations in India based on the political ideology of Hindutva.

<sup>54</sup> The phenomenon has been extensively studied in view of its larger political and cultural implications. For a detailed analysis see Mukul Sharma (2009; 2012).

gained momentum during 1980s and 1990s have now reached a point where all roads would lead to the river Ganga.<sup>55</sup>

In Kerala, concepts and terms about environmentalism and agrarianism have been used interchangeably. Gradually, the development model of the region produced many popular narratives on the region's geography which started to identify land as a marker of cultural distinctiveness and in that way land became a historically available mould to represent values of feudal glory. Thus, the question of sustainability and development rationality became more of a cultural concern. When economic and spatial aspects of agriculture become coterminous with ecological concerns, it obfuscates agricultural land and ecological system as a single unit and cultural stereotypes seem to be operational here. The widely quoted example of the success story of Kerala's environmental movement is that of the movement against Silent Valley Hydro-Electric Project of the 1970s.<sup>56</sup> It is considered as an example of active civil movements in modern Kerala. Concepts of purity and sacredness were widely used in the movement and in the discourses surrounding it. For instance, the use of terms like *shudhi* (cleanliness/purity) and *paithrukam* (tradition) were commonplace and they were attached to ecological diversity and concern over regional geography.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government of India has launched different projects to make dirt-free and hygienic India. *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* and *Clean Ganga* projects as part of this campaigns which aims at making India clean. Nevertheless these initiatives do not seek to address the nexus of economic, political, and cultural premises of India's environmental issues and the initiatives for a clean India go hand in hand with hegemonic ideas of development. That is, the connections Developmental Nationalism make with environmental concerns and cleanliness has to be examined critically given the chequered history of the political itinerary of the Hindu right in India in the post-1990s.

<sup>56</sup> There were widespread protests against the hydro-electric project proposed in the evergreen tropical forest region Silent Valley, situated in the Palakkad district of Kerala. According to environmentalists and expert committee reports, the landscape is one of the few remaining evergreen forests and it is unique with regard to its biodiversity and presence of endangered species. The Save Silent Valley campaigns were remarkable in the history of environmental movements in Kerala and India at large for the extensive public support it gained throughout. The protest continued for almost seven years and finally in 1984, the project was scrapped and the area was declared a National Park by the Government of India.

<sup>57</sup> Here I am referring to the popular writings in Malayalam produced in the period, especially Sugathakumari's writings on environmental movements in Kerala.

The key figure at the forefront of the movement, poet and activist Sugathakumari unequivocally employed the hegemonic language of environmental concerns. Her book titled *Kavu Theendalle*<sup>58</sup> exemplifies the metamorphosis that land had undergone in the dominant collective consciousness of Kerala, from being a material entity to that of a political space and emotional geography; a site to re-claim a cultural hegemony and its lost worlds. The expression *Theendal* (pollution) comes from the registers of discriminatory practices of the stringent caste society of Kerala, which is connected with notions of pollution, untouchability, stigmas associated with the menstrual and post-partum body, and thereby clearly fabricating a nexus of purity and pollution in absolute casteist terminology in the discourse of environmental politics.

Apparently, this discourse led to the consolidation of attributed values and meaning imparted to agriculture so as to make it function as a backdrop to the hegemonic imaginations of past and inculcation of nostalgia. Onam, the popular festival of Kerala, can be viewed as an instance where these fabrications are at work in order to cultivate a universal Malayali sensibility in the linguistic state of Kerala. The romanticization of land and agrarian myths helped the new middle-class Hindu to re-invent a tradition through the nostalgia of a unified *Mahabali* time. The dynamics of communist activism in Kerala have had its share on the repression of feudal glories in the cultural public sphere for a brief period where we find social realism as the dominant aesthetic paradigm in literary and cinematic imaginations exemplified by *Purogamana Sahitya Sangham* (The Progressive Writers Movement) and social realist movies of 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the implementation of Land Reform Bill in the region seems to have added to the fears of landed communities like Nair and Namboodiri who were trying to come to terms with

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<sup>58</sup> *Kavu Theendalle*, first published in 1993, is an anthology of writings where the author Sugathakumari shares her experiences as an environmental activist in Kerala. The book has been considered as Sugathakumari's "ecological autobiography" (Alex 2014).

their loosening grip on the fiscal capital and an ensuing cultural rebellion. The decline of feudal institutions necessitated the quest to invent imaginary landscapes through strategic use of the idea of being progressive but still holding on to traditional (read casteist) values. Thus, it may be argued that the erstwhile landlords re-claimed their hegemonic space within the developmental state by being the volunteers and supporters of agrarian development and thereby presenting themselves as the modern patrons of a lost agrarian culture that grew into a desire and an aspiration in the subsequent decades. This repositioning is premised on two levels of ideological grounding. On the one hand, this retains an imaginary landscape of feudal institutions wherein hegemony continues without impediments. On the other, the caste Hindu self has to negate the fruits of industrial development (the modernity experience that is the excess and external to tradition/*Culture* and therefore resisted) at an ideological level. Arguably, this dialectic is translated into patterns of stereotypes in the cultural public sphere at large. As a corollary to this, hegemonic discourses over land caricatured minority and marginalized communities in hitherto unseen ways and in an unprecedented scale within the cultural representations of the period. Popular Malayalam cinema in post-1990s gives many examples to validate this observation.

Seemingly, in Kerala, the idea of a modern self predicated on the paraphernalia of feudalism marks a continuity with the attempts to imagine a unified Malayali self. It has been argued that by 1930s, this Malayali self was conceptualized alongside the newly formed linguistic community of Malayalam speaking populace which eventually became a sub-national identity within (Ranjith 2011: 172). Thus the lament of a lost Malayali culture and the construct of the ideal modern Malayali self, pre-empted with caste-community-religious affiliations are anchored in two premises. The former is the re-creation of a nostalgic past so as to constitute an imaginary homeland in the present and

the latter is the manoeuvring of cultural symbolisms representing this imaginary homeland which glorifies the feudal pasts most effectively. This was easier and visible since it is the symbols and values associated with a predominantly Nair lifeworld that have been used to create an integrated Malayali sensibility (Ranjith 2011: 134-147; Dasan 2012: xix).<sup>59</sup> The imagination of a political economy based on agrarian system came with the baggage of values purported as innate to agricultural traditions. These so-called agrarian values appeared to be hegemonic in nature and thereby paved way for novel methods of maintaining caste practices. This could be one of the reasons why making sense of the contemporary remain as complex as making sense of past which render any attempt to imagine a monolithic imagination of modernity unviable and an impossibility in the larger heterogeneous Malayali community. In short, at the outset, these arguments established the importance of a political economy that should also accommodate Kerala's agricultural sector. But at a deeper level, these discussions left the public sphere with cultural allegories giving paramount position to agriculture and rendering it accessible to many ideologies that is at work in the making of a unified "Kerala culture." Later, this became a comfortable habitat for "Malayali nostalgia" which gathered wider popularity with its hegemonic underpinnings and political use.

Evidently, the new interest in agrarian values foregrounds religious and caste-communities' affiliations with land, agriculture practices, and the space they occupy in the political economy of the region. The discourse by and large emphasized the absence of "the typical farmer" as a cultural entity available and the absence of productive land which is decisive in the construction of the social identity of the subject. These social imaginaries essentialized commercial agriculture where cash crop farming and cash crop

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<sup>59</sup> It has been argued that it is "Nair subjectivity and its epistemological programming that constitute what is known as the Malayali sensibility" ( Dasan 2012: xix).

farmers as money-minded and against the ethos of the traditional social system. At the same time, food grain cultivation was presented as a social virtue and moral responsibility. This binary formed over agricultural traditions of the region defined communities in terms of the association they maintain with land and agriculture, nullifying the historical, social, and economic contexts within which such segmentations happened.

As modernity intervened in the ownership patterns, hegemony re-organized itself in such a way that it relied not on capital alone, but also on the kind of relationship the new farmer maintains with what s/he owns. This stance earned the potential of defining the cultural importance of the farmer even in terms of the choice of crop. The collective anxieties on the degradation of Kerala's much popular water resources and the ecological importance of wetland and paddy cultivation in the region offer an example in this context. As evident from the aesthetic imaginaries of the time, wetland cultivation and backwater resources are perceived to be an intrinsic part of a unified Malayali culture. This was also the time when transnational and internal migration created aesthetics of nostalgia rooted in agrarian traditions of the region.<sup>60</sup>

It is pertinent here to talk about the relationship Christians maintain with land in the context of Syrian Christian migration from Travancore to Malabar. Malabar migration was a momentous political event in the history of Kerala where a considerable number of Syrian Christians moved to British Malabar which was subsequently merged with unified Kerala. Mainstream literary representations imparted a political meaning to land and apparently, land is the crucial political unit within the migration discourse. In the

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<sup>60</sup> Kerala is one of the highest mobile communities with considerable number of migrations to Middle East (which was common in 1970s), Persian Gulf, and later on to European nations, apart from the movements within Kerala and India. See Working papers on Kerala Migration Survey carried out by Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum by K. C. Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan (2015) and K. S. Mathew et al. (2005).

mainstream migration discourse, land seems to be the prerogative of upper caste communities – mainly that of Nair and Namboodiri communities – and Christian migrants are neither legitimate heirs nor custodians of land. The cultivation of cash crop pitched against traditional paddy farming is symbolic of the demolition of feudal order and signalled a new mode of farming culture and economy. The major works in Malayalam *Vishakanyaka* published in 1948 (Pottekkattu) and *Orotha* originally published in 1982 (Kakkanadan) presents this cultural unconscious in subtle ways. Both novels represent the trials and tribulations of migrant Syrian Christian community of Malabar. As we read in the novels, the migrants' plight had to do with the new crops and farming culture they brought to land. The cultivation of new crops, especially the introduction of new cash crops by Christian migrants fails to bring fortune and the whole migrant community is washed away to oblivion. The “land” forever remains a longing, a lack in both these accounts. In other words, both the novels present migration as miserable failures of Syrian Christians.

In short, when modernity is conceived as external but inevitable, it is taken as synonymous with the “other.” Here this other is the religious minority embodied in Christian subject. The strategic re-deployment of feudal value systems into the contemporary can be interpreted as the invocation of feudal glory. This, when contrasted to movies with professed Christian setting, extends the meanings of these categories to binaries of “traditional” and “modern” spaces. That is, these films weave a subplot on modernity rhetoric predicated on metaphors of feudal values and venerated feudal pasts.

The itinerary of this line of thought has rather interesting modulations in cinematic narratives as they represent lamentations on industrialization, fear of new job markets, and the growing expansion of urban spaces that undoubtedly opened up many anxieties in



terms of “preservation and protection.” Visibly, the feudal hangover on lush green environment and topography of the region is an important part of the middle class-upper caste anxieties manifested in the aesthetics of the popular. The popular memory on land attaches notions of sacrality to it, which simultaneously feeds into the perpetuation of the hegemonic, Nair nostalgia as a pan-Kerala phenomenon. Within this discourse, Syrian Christians occupy the strategic position of shrewd businessmen who carry the burden and benefits of an industrial and developmental modernity. They are the agents of new economic prospects and the spaces emerging from that.

It has already been explicated how values associated with agriculture tend to hegemonize other forms of belongingness to land. Syrian Christians’ experience in trade and commerce implicated them in such a way that they are distanced from the cultural habitus that land brought in. Ecological concerns became the postscript of peasant past in the narratives of developmental modernity and it resonated ecological concerns in the same language of cultural exclusivity. The intricacies of this politics feature implicitly in many movies. In such movies, the boisterous hero is habitually seen as a prophet of entrepreneurship. He often brags about his Syrian Christian heredity, legacy as money makers, and his many money-spinning trades. In fact, by doing so he actually becomes the legitimate partner of the new industrial culture. For example in the movie, *Naatturajavu* (Dir. Shaji Kailas, 2004) the protagonist Charlie owns a quarry. This quarry is where we see the ostentatious entry of the protagonist in the introductory fight scene. Charlie is an industrialist and manages many other enterprises specific to new industrial requirements. This image stands at variance with the hegemonic imaginations of an ideal Malayali male who ought to be the protector of land. This Christian masculine figure secedes from the grand narrative of ecological concerns as well as agrarian nostalgias. Here, religious identity serves as markers of excesses inside the dialectics of ecological

and environmental concerns. Moreover, Syrian Christians had histories of internal migration from Travancore to hilly Malabar and High-ranges of Kerala. It is in this context that the dominant discourses on migration present Malabar migrants as “intruders” in the “homeland.” They are intruders not just in the idioms of belongingness and legitimacy, but also within the logic of ecological concerns. Obviously, the common sense on Syrian Christian migrants picture them as callous anti-environmentalists and the cultural history of this common sense demands nuanced reading precisely for this reason. *The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel* (WGEEP) reports on the conservation of the Western Ghats brought in a cauldron of emotional responses from both migrants and the environmentalists alike.<sup>61</sup> The environmental discourse tacitly brought in caricatured images of community and this marks a continuation with the binary of agrarian and industrial economy.

### **The “Family Cinema” and the Politics of Land**

When it comes to Malayalam cinema, Christian masculine figures are shown to have found their lineage of political activism in right-wing political organizations as a natural byproduct of their political formation. However, Malayalam cinema maintains a dominant masculine ideal modelled on the image of the left revolutionary. This masculine

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<sup>61</sup> WGEEP reports, popularly known as Gadgil-Kashurirangan reports (named after the chairmen of the research commission Madhav Gadgil and K. Kashurirangan), are the outcome of two environmental research projects by the *Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change*, government of India. On August 2011, the first commission of WGEEP under the direction of Madhav Gadgil submitted a report that emphasized the express necessity of conservation of the Western Ghats. This was followed by Kashurirangan report, submitted in 2013 and guided by K. Kashurirangan in response to the widespread protest that Gadgil report received. Huge criticisms were leveled against them for their alleged negligence of the human factor as the regions in question are thickly populated areas. A significant faction of the protestors was from migrant Christian community especially from Roman Catholic Church who constitute the majority population of the area. Evidently, the institutionally organized protesters and environmentalists differed in concerns and priorities and the manipulative nature of the Church’s arguments were visible throughout. Nevertheless, the striking point is that the whole debate and series of protests together with discourses of migration histories of Syrian Christians to hilly areas of Kerala like Malabar fed the polemic in the public wherein Christians were deemed anti-environmentalists and anti-traditionalist altogether.

self established a narrative of left revolutionary in the sphere of the popular and this idea of masculinity has always been there in the cultural imaginary of Kerala ever since (Radhakrishnan 2006: 130). Ratheesh Radhakrishnan's analysis on masculinities in Kerala illustrates how the image of the left revolutionary had been equated with selflessness and social commitment, and it idealizes him as one who does not desire for power and material possessions (2006). Implicitly, right-wing political activism here stands for everything that is in opposition to the revolutionary images of left masculinity and consequently, this figure stands in contrast to the selfless masculine in the service of society.

It is into this chasm between the militant leftist and rightist masculine imaginaries that Sreenivasan and Sathyan Anthikkad arrived with their family dramas – the popular films which claimed to represent the “common people” of Kerala. This genre of films was visibly different from the realist aesthetics of cinema in the previous decades represented by the art-house movies and middlebrow movies. The common people-cinema of this category appeared to have sprouted from a different ideology and spectatorial imaginations. The Sathyan Anthikkad-Sreenivasan duo is famous for etching lifelike stories from within the grammar of popular cinema which created a genre of their own. These family dramas by and large have scenes that show the lush green landscapes and virtues of village life. It would not nevertheless take too long to understand that the so-called cinema of the common people replaced the left revolutionary by an agrarian nostalgia. In doing so, these films channelled the middle-class social realist aesthetics of Malayalam cinema that imagine an ahistorical, unmarked citizen subject into a re-energized hegemonic Hindu masculinity which became dominant narrative in post-1990s Malayalam cinema. And ironically these movies use the Nair masculine models to install the idea of the unmarked subject of the state.

The film *Sandesham* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1991), directed by Santhyan Anthikkad and scripted and acted by Sreenivasan, expounds how this posturing of the Nair subjectivity implicated the imaginations of land and political geography. The answer to the question of Christian identity and Christians' space in the political economy of the region lies within the ideological nexus exemplified in the film. *Sandesham* is a significant text in this regard that elucidates the way land became a political category vital in defining community identity. The discontent towards contemporary political activism, the return to traditional familial space, and the posturing of agriculture as infused with cultural value symbolic of tradition becomes the signposts that make *Sandesham* a family drama. It tells the story of Raghavan Nair (Thilakan), a retired railway employee and his family consisting of his wife Bhanumathi and their four children. The film begins with Raghavan Nair's much awaited homecoming after retirement to join his family. However, his joy was short-lived and he confronts the deplorable family scene. The two sons squander the father's earnings and family's wealth by being "petty politicians." Also, they evade job prospects and household responsibilities despite their professional qualifications. Besides, to worsen family relationships, the two brothers opt for being part of two mutually hostile political organizations suggesting the dominant left and right-wing political parties in Kerala. Tensions grow as the sons' political ambitions and mindless competition between them destroys the family's wealth (the land Raghavan Nair bought with his earning of a lifetime) and respectability in society (the inability to conduct a ceremonial wedding for his daughter). It even disturbs the sacred family space of Raghavan Nair, causing problems between Raghavan Nair and his benign wife. His wife, who according to Raghavan Nair himself, has never done anything to complain for in their decades-long married life; except in that particular instance where, by yielding to their son Prabhakaran's (Sreenivasan) compulsion, she secretly consented to pledge the

land Raghavan Nair had bought in her name for the purpose of their daughter's marriage. Into the family drama of the Nair household comes the idealistic, good-natured, and hardworking young man Udayabhanu – the agricultural officer played by Siddique – whom Raghavan Nair approaches to seek advice on farming. Upon hearing about his destitute childhood and the hardships encountered to become what he is, Raghavan Nair and Bhanumathi feels for Udayabhanu and eventually he becomes the suitor to Raghavan Nair's daughter, despite his son Prakashan's disagreement with the proposal as Udayabhanu is a bureaucrat who has no respect for politicians.

The film satirizes the vanity and hypocrisy of politicians and the character Udayabhanu is portrayed in sharp contrast to the other two male characters – the younger generation of the Nair *tharavadu*. Udayabhanu is candid, self-contented, and untainted by political motives when placed against the problem kids of the family; although later on they will be given the chance to repent and return to the *tharavadu*. The traditional space Raghavan Nair's household maintains is marked by the division of inner/outer spaces manifested through gender hierarchy. This binary is amply substantiated by the submissive wife, uneducated and obedient daughter, and their exchanges with the outer world from behind the doors and in between domestic chores. Anything outside it is alien to them and it is shown as excesses that evoke laughter and wonderment. This is best illustrated by the event of the Hindi speaking north Indian politician's visit to the house wherein even Raghavan Nair, who has travelled across and lived outside Kerala becomes numb before the havoc it wreaked.

On closer reading, it can be deciphered that Udayabhanu presents a different kind of modernity which is legitimate and deeply rooted in tradition – the land. His identity, as suggested in the film, is defined by his love for agriculture/tradition and his contempt –

which he shares equally with the entire film itself – towards political activism. This love towards tradition is in terms of land, cultivation, and above all his choice of girl to get married to, who is shown as an uneducated village girl epitomizing innocence and “nonmodern” domesticity. Apparently, Udayabhanu’s acceptance in the family, though being an orphan, having no claims of land (“not blessed with even a cent<sup>62</sup> of soil” as he says in the film), ancestry or lineage owes largely to his attitude towards agriculture and land and thus towards tradition. A passionate agricultural officer, Udayabhanu himself proudly admits that he is nicknamed after *Mannudayabhanu*, because of his obsession with soil. It has to be noted that, *mannu* is the Malayalam word which literally means soil and earth, but it is used in a variety of connotations related to home, land, wealth, region/nation, and geography. The domestic space marked by traditional symbols of *nilavilakku*<sup>63</sup> and familial women underlines this narrative of self-articulation where it rejuvenates hegemonic spaces through significations of belongingness to land. Thus this narrative renders all other possibilities of articulation of the self, imperfect, leaving them as metaphors of lack.

Unlike the male characters in *Sandesham*, the typical Christian male categorically distanced from land is always in want of something for which he thrives and wins the games. In other words, the failures of the prodigal sons of the *tharavadu* are actually successes; for, they have their spaces elsewhere – definitely not in politics – and roles to play so that they can literally recover lost lands.<sup>64</sup> Contrary to Udayabhanu who owns nothing but still feels at home everywhere, the lost migrants of Malabar, as well as the

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<sup>62</sup> A unit of measurement of land equivalent to 40.47 square meter.

<sup>63</sup> Traditional oil lamp customarily used in upper caste religious and ritualistic practices of Hindu and Syrian Christian households in Kerala.

<sup>64</sup> In *Sandesham*, the elder son Prabhakaran (Sreenivasan’s character) tricks his mother into getting the land pledged for money and he loses it eventually. When he realizes his mistakes he regrets and starts over his career as a lawyer. In the final scene, we see him assuring his father that he will bring back the land to the family very soon.

successful Christian hero both, find themselves equally empty. In *Sandesham* there are scenes where Udayabhanu makes it clear that he is not bothered about a politician's threat or losing a career as he is not insecure about his job prospects either. Coming back to the narratives on migration, in both novels *Orotha* and *Vishakanyaka*, land symbolizes the impossible homeland and perennial quest of the migrant.

It is the impossibility, the unfulfilled desires, the abiding feeling of lack that urges the Christian subject to perform his "duties" elsewhere as businessman, industrialist, and politician. Sreenivasan and Sathyan Anthikkad invalidate the potentials of modern political associations outside family by bringing them back to *tharavadu*. Furthermore, by implication, the unidentified self can seek existence only through land which the Christian can never fully own. Another example from the film *Ezhupunna Tharakan*<sup>65</sup> (Dir. P. G. Viswambharan, 1999), in a way, completes the argument. The film talks about an unresolved legal dispute between an erstwhile royal family and an affluent Syrian Christian family over a large estate and the battle over land metaphorically signals this recurring sense of lack even when they are a powerful community otherwise. This battle signifies the symbolic battle for hegemony even when Syrians Christians are one of the wealthiest and influential communities in present-day Kerala.<sup>66</sup>

The increased importance that land is deemed with lies in a paradoxical position since a traditional farmer or an uneducated agriculturist is still reckoned irrational and incapable of epistemic mediations. In fact, it is this irony that renders the shift in the cultural values of land suspicious. The reasons for the labelling of agriculture as substandard when compared to other vocations in Kerala have social, economic, and cultural dimensions. This includes the historical transformations in the use and status of

<sup>65</sup> *Ezhupunna Tharakan* is about a Syrian Christian family and their rivalry against an erstwhile royal family of the region.

<sup>66</sup> See K. C. Zachariah (2016).

land. The changes in these spheres left the agrarian sector deeply disempowered within the region. Arguably, this impossibility of a full-fledged agrarian system became the bedrock of new claims for hegemony and it generates narratives of romanticized farming culture. It is the same rhetoric that continues to produce eulogistic ideas of food sustainability and self-reliance largely among the salaried, middle class-upper caste communities.

Contemporary Kerala witnessed many movements to protect ecosystems and natural resources but it is only apprehensions about the deterioration of agricultural sector which could gain constant support and visibility in the mainstream and popular media. Most of them nevertheless remained as stories of past glory. Magazines like *Karshakasree* and *Karshakan*, exclusively for agricultural news and awareness, had already acquired a steady readership by this time. Consequently, the proliferation of virtual media spaces floated by leading dailies offered exclusive platforms for such discourses. At present, Kerala's deteriorating agrarian sector attract an enduring and massive support of middle class at an empirical level, which were further strengthened by the Endosulfan issue<sup>67</sup> and the subsequent fear of toxic consumption through commercially produced vegetables that largely come from outside Kerala.

At the moment, Sreenivasan and Anthikkad are strong proponents of organic farming and they are again in the scene with another "message," this time not from the cinema hall but from paddy fields. Recently they joined hands with Manju Warriar, one of the most popular actresses in Malayalam cinema to advertise the necessity of organic farming and the alarming dangers of toxic vegetables that Malayalis consume. This was

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<sup>67</sup> One of the most toxic pesticides Endosulfan had been used in the cashew plantations of Kasaragod (a district in northern Kerala) for more than 20 years that led to grave genetic disorders and chronic health problems over a generation of people in the region which led to a temporary and restricted ban on the pesticide. The debates are still on and have received worldwide attention.



after the sweeping success of her movie *How Old are you?* (Dir. Roshan Andrews, 2014) which presented a homily on organic farming. The digital archives of Malayalam dailies which set aside exclusive space for agriculture gained a new momentum, adding to the agrarian imaginaries of Malayali culture and geography. It is in the wake of these “vegetable stories” that *Malayala Manorama*, one of the leading dailies in Malayalam, brought out a half page story on Sreenivasan and Sathyan Anthikkad discussing their views on agriculture and their success story of organic farming in Kerala (U. K. Varrier 2014: 2). That was a time when the question of toxic vegetables appeared as the gravest issue in Malayali public sphere and the news story was written in a congratulatory note to the filmmakers for their films as well as their life after cinema as agriculturalists. The title of the story was “*Thani Naadan Sandesham*” (“A Pure Green Message”) alluding to their 1992 cinema *Sandesham* and their “*sandesham*” (message) to Malayalis. The same daily brought forth another story where Manju Warriar, the new brand ambassador of organic farming, inaugurating Sreenivasan’s organic paddy harvest. Thematic analysis of the two movies *Sandesham* and *How Old are You?* where Sreenivasan, Anthikkad, and Manju Warriar have key roles, is significant to elucidate the argument further.

*How Old Are You?* (hereafter HOU), illustrates the many layers of meaning of the “unhealthy” content in imported things. The film was a much anticipated one since it was Manju Warriar’s re-entry into the film industry after a gap of fourteen years. The story revolves around the life of a Hindu middle-class government employee Nirupama essayed by Manju Warriar. The film was an instant success and the sensation it created made a case for the question of women’s space in family and public sphere. The question of women’s space surfaced the film in multiple levels because the film made tacit allusions to the actor’s personal life wherein she was apparently coming out of her marriage. Seemingly the narrative pattern responded to the private life of Manju Warriar along with

the celluloid life/public life of Nirupama, the protagonist who is surviving an unhappy marriage by volunteering herself to a public cause of organic, non-toxic farming. Hence, her comeback to the industry, the narrative of the emancipated woman at the service of society/nation (there are instances where the prospects of getting rewarded from the president of India make decisive turns, and the dramatic and exaggerated president-episodes play a crucial part in the narrative) and her re-appearance as a single woman again, work in tandem with the logic of the outer space manifested in the structuring of Kerala public sphere. This notion of outer space is decisive in the conceptualization of women's identity and gendered patriotisms.

When the issue at stake is (agri)culture, this leaning adds vigour to the process of inventing "tradition." Hence a particular mode of farming, cultivation of particular crops, consumption of certain types of food, and dissemination of the idea of self-reliance become coterminous with being nationalist and legitimately modern. The idea of self-sustainability is predicated also on provincialism and linguistic nationalism peculiar to South India. HOU's moral apprehensions towards Malayali's reliance on Tamil Nadu for food invoke the Tamil-Malayali cultural difference. It has been observed that Malayali subjectivity is marked with rationality, intelligence, and notions on purity whereas Tamil is categorically associated with excesses of emotionalism, impulsiveness, and pollution.<sup>68</sup> In representative spaces, Malayali identity finds its inferior/villainous other in Tamil identity. Arguably HOU drives home the idea of a national modern rooted in new-traditionalism. In that sense, HOU is trying to cook a language of "unpolluted", "pesticide-free" tradition. The next section looks at this politics of food and its engagement with cultural nationalism.

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<sup>68</sup> See Manju E. P. (2013).

Sacralisation of the subject seems fundamental in the conceptualization of citizenship and this sacralization is satiated by modes of affiliations which “the self” embarks on. Organic food movements and health food movements become sites for the sacralisation of self where the discourse foregrounds a responsible citizen. The ideological premise of food politics embodies questions of legitimacy in this context. Clearly, the difference between “unhealthy” and “healthy” food practices becomes more ideological than empirical. The convergence of the health food movement with vegetarianism makes the body imperative in the sacralisation of self. What is surprising about the popular understanding of quality food is the sudden turn towards “neo-traditionalism”, a movement which highlighted among other things, the necessity of uncontaminated natural resources as well as uncontaminated body. Here I am not saying that this is a unique, localised incident. Evidently, health food movement is a global phenomenon and there are instances where it served as the body politic of counterculture as Jill Dubisch points out in the case of American movements in 1960s and 70s (1989). Even then its religious nature is undisputed and an idea of geographically located community was entwined within. Accordingly, the movement popularized a larger idea of public where “people should work in harmony with nature and not against it” (Dubisch 1989: 71).

In the film HOU, apart from the palpable imageries of a vegetarian culture, religion seems to be a strategically employed ploy. The characterization of Susan, Nirupama’s friend and classmate explains this in the way she intervenes in the narrative pattern. The stereotypical character of the corporate employee Susan in HOU offers the binary in the text by being a sharp contrast to Nirupama and the traditional domestic environment where we often find the latter in. This is evident from the very mode of sartorial expressions of Susan and Nirupama. One might think of the validity of this

argument because in the movie the character Ayyer is also an affluent businessman.<sup>69</sup> But it must be emphasized that he is the righteous and purist investor, unlike Susan. There is more than one instance in the film where we are told about his virtues by way of his simplicity, vegetarianism, and adherence to supreme values amply recapitulated by his reluctance to “serve cancer” to the guests by cooking toxic vegetables in his daughter’s wedding banquet. Similar to Ayyer, the “virtuous businessman,” Susan is also shown as the catalyst in Nirupama’s journey on her way to an emancipated national woman. The problem lies where Ayyer turns out to be the agent morale and promoter while Susan goes out of the frame as Nirupama emerges triumphant. Strikingly, Susan is not seen in any such domestic environments and she is constantly on the move. We see her in the car, in the park, in college, in public gathering and in the airport. For a last time, the spectators are informed about Ayyer’s love for society (nation) as an indisputable declaration of his moral legitimacy. Ayyer hands the remuneration for the organic vegetables over to Nirupama and her companions and invites them as special guests to the wedding. But Nirupama replies that she cannot make it to the wedding, as she will be leaving home (nation) before the event to join her family in Ireland but she has made arrangements so that the party will be unaffected. Ostensibly it was a critical decision for Nirupama as her choice would decide her space in the family as well as society. It is here that Ayyer registers the voice of the nation in a masterstroke by declaring: “my daughter’s marriage is a private affair and it will be taken care of. But you are much more important to the nation.”

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<sup>69</sup> Ayyer is a wealthy entrepreneur and he offers to pay a decent remuneration if he gets enough pesticide-free vegetables for his daughter’s wedding lunch party. Though initially hesitant and dejected by her husband’s disheartening response, Nirupama undertakes the challenge of cultivating organic vegetables within a short span of time by making an organized attempt at roof top gardening and succeeds against all odds.

Suggestively, the state patronization enjoyed by Nirupama and the stereotype of Christian entrepreneurs subtly encoded in Susan's character, impart a gendered perspective to the typecasting by entwining them with the question of women's space in public sphere. The investiture of Manju Warriar as the brand ambassador of the organic farming project spearheaded by Kudumbasree Kerala,<sup>70</sup> and the goodwill ambassador of *She Taxi*, another state initiative for and by women for safe and secure journey accentuates Nirupama's influence on the image of the artist Manju Warriar. This connection which Nirupama/Manju Warriar establishes with the women of contemporary Kerala echoes the now archetypal nationalist imaginaries which essentialize ideal womanhood primarily in a sacrificial self. The telephonic conversation shown to have happened between Nirupama and Susan is symptomatic of the problematic existence of religious others in the discursive platform of hegemonic nationalism. As Nirupama is walking down the steps of Rashtrapathi Bhavan,<sup>71</sup> Susan is getting ready for an international flight. Susan's journey is uncertain as she is constantly on the move. Nirupama also plans a European tour to show her daughter around. But for Nirupama, it is pre-determined by time, place, and intention and therefore the journeys she set out are always meant to culminate in the return to home (the nation). In the camouflage of an emancipated woman, Nirupama is imprinted in the same colours as the nationalist imaginaries which defined women essentially as caretakers of tradition. When I say Susan is caught up in the clichéd image of a modernized Christian woman, Nirupama is equally standstill too.

The depiction of Susan proposes a preamble to the discussions on Christian identity in Malayalam cinema. For instance, Susan is always an outsider while Nirupama

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<sup>70</sup> Kudumbasree is a women empowerment programme designed by the Government of Kerala as part of the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM).

<sup>71</sup> Official residence and office of President of India located in the capital city of New Delhi.

represents an internal sacralised image. Susan seems to be the Good Samaritan but Nirupama is the ideal woman who wins both family and nation. Ultimately the modern Susan remains a migrant who is in a hurry to chase “unfulfilled desires.” It is in this context that religion illustrates the difference between “us” and “them” represented by Nirupama and Susan respectively. Interestingly, the corporate businesswoman – Susan – embodies the same logic of her masculine counterparts in Malayalam cinema.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Sathyan Anthikkad, Sreenivasan, and Manju Warrier have given expression to the deeply rooted Malayali nostalgias of a Caste Hindu past through their movies and life outside movies. The discourse of organic farming in contemporary Kerala, which has been imparted a popular appeal by Manju Warrier, can be traced back to many other messages Sreenivasan disseminates through the film *Sandesham*. Both *Sandesham* and *How Old Are You?* contribute to the de-politicization of public sphere and sacralization of identity through the political use of land and ways of living.

### **The Secular Modern and the Minority Subject**

So far, the discussion on Christian presence in Malayalam films examined how nostalgias on land function *a priori* in the dominant Malayali subjectivity. Another point relevant to the discussion engages with family space and religious identity. Observably marriage or reunion of the couple is pertinent to cinematic imagination in India. One of the recurrent features and repeated events in the typical Christian family films is the seemingly natural, inter-religious conjugal relationship. Inter-religious marriage appears to be an indispensable part of these movies and the invariably upper caste female partner of the protagonist come from Hindu aristocratic families having lineage of Brahmin, Nair or erstwhile ruling families of the region. The films *Lelam* (Dir. Joshi, 1997), *Ezhupunna*

*Tharakan* (Dir. P. G. Viswambharan, 1999), *Swapnakkoodu* (Dir. Kamal, 2003), *Pranjiyettan and the Saint* (Dir. Ranjith, 2010), *Pothen Vaava* (Dir. Joshi, 2006), *Thacholi Varghese Chekavar* (Dir. T. K. Rajeev Kumar 1995), *Gaandharvam* (Dir. Sangeeth Shivan, 1993) and *Cocktail* (Dir. Arun Kumar Aravind, 2010) are just a few examples in this line. Even in cinemas where religiosity does not make or break the plot, the Christian hero's partner is found to be caste Hindu. For example, the movie *Photographer* (Dir. Ranjan Pramod, 2006) contextualizes Muthanga incident<sup>72</sup> and *Puthiya Niyamam* (Dir A. K. Sajan, 2016) has a victim of gang rape and her survival as the plot but the convention of Brahmin-Syrian Christian marriage is unbroken.

Raymond Bellour has observed, “[t]he cinema, emerging in the historical space of the modern, is committed, . . . . to the endless reproduction of the couple, in narratives that bring about or restore the conjugal scene” (qtd. in M. M. Prasad 1993: 76). It can be argued that the desire for the modern, through forms of institutions that are associated with colonial influences of modernity, made possible the heteronormative patrilineal family system in the place of polygamous and matrilineal family systems in India. In Indian cinema, modernity imagines typical secular modern individuals where caste and class play crucial roles. Moreover, inter-religious marriage and its engagement with the idea of modernity have historical importance in India. It has been observed that in the post-independent Nehruvian era;

Love across class, caste, religion and region became, a sign of the national-secular. . . . [L]ove became a form of elective affinity that insistently, even if briefly or casually, lifted the barriers of caste, class, religion, region and nation. . . . At one level, this was a nationalist carry-over – love marriage had become a

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<sup>72</sup> The Muthanga incident refers to the police firing on 19 February 2003 at the gathering of Adivasi people who were staging protest against Kerala government with the demand for land.

secular nationalist *cause celebre* with many famous couples. . . . At another level, this was situated in the conscious anti-feudalism, ‘unity in diversity’, and the institution of an encouraging legal space for intermarriage that marked Nehruvian nationalism. (Sangari 2007: 277-278)

The politics of the Hindu-Christian “marriage” has to be looked at within the stringent caste-community structure of Kerala as well as in the imagination of the national modern, especially when pitched against the history of Hindu-Muslim politics in Independent India. Representations picture Dalits and Muslims as bad, aggressive, and habitually villainous, the Christian becomes synonymous with what can be called as the model-modern minority. Suggestively they are a tamable entity. The Christian male, baptized into the Hindu fold by marrying an “upper caste” modern woman, become part of the national community. Thus, the marriage metaphorically stands for the “unfulfilled desire of modernity” which is taken as a move towards tradition and thereby towards a hegemonic idea of self-fashioning. By doing so, the Christian male surpasses symbolic powers of two systems – feudalism and secular modernity.

In the films discussed, the Syrian Christian claims of upper caste origin and hegemony acquire legitimacy when it is wedded to Hindu patronization. The inner/outer dichotomy paints Christian masculinity as tainted and deformed because of their cultural identity as agents of capitalist modernity. The skepticism towards entrepreneurial subjectivity made it dubious and therefore unwarranted. Apparently, there is a circular movement of resistance to the ideals of western modernity. And it culminates in identifying the inner domain, which forms the ideological bedrock of tradition and an ideal space to re-invigorate feudal order in subtle ways. The suspicion towards industrial society justifies the revival of feudal values and cements the stereotype of a pristine, inner



domain. This is evident in the portrayal of female characters who are voiceless, passive women without agency. The time frame of this genre is important in the history of Malayalam cinema since they were to function as a preamble to the later *thampuran* films of the 2000s where we find the Brahminical *thampuran* hero who puts everything back to its “proper” place. That towards 2000s it became impossible to imagine a Christian superhero like the Brahminical masculine figure, itself defines the trajectory of modernity within. These post-2000 films of this category are marked not only by the return of the modern-king but also by the many ways in which they de-politicize the public sphere in terms of their constructions of femininity, subaltern and minority subjectivity.

Ravi S. Vasudevan points out how Indian cinema privileges a Hindu narrative that renders other narratives subordinate to this identity (Vasudevan 1995: 2809). Accordingly, the re-invention of hegemonic masculinity superimposed feudal repertoire onto other voices including that of the heroine who is often another “fan within” (Venkiteswaran 2014: 37). To put it simply, in films centred on Christian masculine figure, the upper caste women are in no way more privileged than the other sidekick characters devoted to the master, just the same way as in *thampuran* movies. The upper caste woman’s presence is used to complement the Syrian Christian subjectivity writ in the language of feudal order.

The way caste identity engages with the discourse of modernity is evident in the context. Nonetheless, the interreligious marriage of the Syrian Christian male and Hindu woman appears naturally en route and it does not hold the power to control the course of events in the plot. The choice of marriage does not turn out to be the “tragic flaw” and therefore unable to determine the nature of narration or its treatment. This is in sharp contrast with other films which have inter-caste and inter-religious marriage that engages

with the plot and at times defines the genre of movies, where partners in marriage come from lower caste and class backgrounds. Examples are aplenty and this aspect itself could well be the subject of discussion. I would briefly discuss a few films to illuminate this point.

The films *Manasinakkare* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 2003), *Kadha Thudarunnu* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 2010), and *Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal* tend to fall into this category. The film *Manasinakkare* narrativizes an affluent Syrian Christian family's history and presents it from the perspective of the now aged and neglected matriarch Kochuthressia (played by Sheela). The film has allusions to internal and international migrations, Syrian Christianity, the transition to the nuclear family system, and the transformation in Kerala society at large in the wake of globalization and interventions of capitalist economy. In the film, there is an inter-religious marriage but it does not happen inside the traditional Syrian Christian family but on its peripheries. Neither has it come naturally as an extension of Christian masculinity. Quite convincingly, the secular marriage is credited to the communist background of the seemingly lower caste/class family. The protagonist of the story, Reji, is a lower class male, visibly deprived of economic and social privileges usually associated with Syrian Christians. Reji eventually marries a lower caste girl from a family of communists. This marriage is decisive in the film as it is into this secular family that Kochuthressia enters, leaving behind her *tharavadu* and family unlike the usual happy endings of family cinema marked with reconciliations and grand family reunion. *Kadha Thudarunnu* tells the story of a struggling Hindu widow Vidyalakshmi and her daughter who tries to make both ends meet after her husband's demise. Her parents have abandoned her because of her marriage with a Muslim boy and the narrative focuses on how she moves on with the help of a poor auto-rickshaw driver Preman who eventually falls for her. Though

Vidyalakshmi is a doctor by profession, she reciprocates Preman's feelings. She accepts him irrespective of the class-caste difference and also escapes from the threats of "Muslim fundamentalists" who want to take away her child. By implication, the movie laments her decision to marry a Muslim boy and it is taken as the "tragic flaw" that takes the narrative forward.

In the film *Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal*, the male lead Roy marries a Dalit woman, but his choice fits well with his image of an irresponsible squanderer in the family and the marriage is the determining factor in the film. Roy is a theatre artist and playwright but his father Kochuthoma constantly criticizes his creative potentials. He is of the opinion that Roy is a hero without substance. Roy's tragic flaw is his being an irresponsible dilettante and amateur actor who tries his luck in various entrepreneurial enterprises. In this context, both art and subjectivity of an artist come into play wherein the art itself becomes a religion. The politics implicit in standards of art and the identity of the artist are discussed elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> He remains a failure and distant from his modern migrant family ethos until and unless he becomes successful in an industrial job. Interestingly it is the same director Sathyan Anthikkad who directed all the three films where the aberration from the stereotypical Syrian Christian-Hindu marriage is channelled away by introducing a lower class Christian (*Manasinakkare*), Muslim man (*Katha Thudarunnu*), and a Dalit woman (*Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal*) in order to present secular marriages. To put it briefly, the premises within which the normal and the aberrant happen are equally problematic. On a closer look, both validates the selfsame caste values and stereotypical subjectivities from different perspectives and authenticate the typecasting of Syrian Christian and Dalit identities.

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<sup>73</sup> Chapter three examines this point in detail.

The ways in which marriage tries to negotiate with the idea of secular modern in the Christian family movies offer a different paradigm in itself. Another example from the film *Pranchiyettan and the Saint* would exemplify this. *Pranchiyettan and the Saint* is the story of Francis aka Pranchi, a self-made business tycoon from central Kerala. The entire narrative is his endless efforts to earn a name and reputation in society. There is a humorous episode where we find Pranchi's effort to grab *Padmashree*.<sup>74</sup> Pranchi thinks *Padmashree* would be a shortcut to earn the respectability denied to him; to be endowed with a new citizenship and a new name by none other than the nation-state. However, he fails in that attempt in the most miserable manner, making the defeat heavier than all the other chances he had lost in life.

Finally, the defeated and sorrowful Pranchi visits a church and engages in a dialogue with Francis *Punyalan*.<sup>75</sup> There we see the good-hearted Pranchi where he discloses his intention to adopt the homeless boy he had been taking care of for a short period. To Francis' surprise, *Punyalan* reveals through a vision that whatever Francis thinks he had lost was never meant for him and the one he really deserves will ultimately reach him, hinting at his unrequited love for the Hindu girl Padmasree. The parallel established between nation and the Hindu woman by calling the nation and the woman Padmasree has to be noted. Here, apparently, the same logic of Hindu-Christian marriage is employed in disguise. The lack Francis suffers can be filled with tradition/nation signified by the Hindu woman. Here too the Christian subject is legitimised in the cinematic dialectic of secularism through the marriage of Christianity with Hinduism. This is further enhanced by his sacrificial decision to adopt the orphaned boy. Hence he becomes even more modern and rational by accepting the prospects of marriage with a

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<sup>74</sup>“Padmasree” is the “fourth highest civilian award” to be given to an Indian citizen by the Government of India.

<sup>75</sup> Saint Francis of Assisi

Hindu woman and by offering a home to the homeless boy, despite the fact that a transformation of identity was not granted to him.

The cultural superiority attributed to traditional Hindu household operates by making binaries. For example, *Chattakkari* (Dir. Santhosh Sethumadhavan, 2012), that tells the story of Anglo-Indian life in Kerala, by and large, emphasizes the Indian-ness and the sacred domain of the Indian/Hindu family against the stereotype of West. In the film text, the Anglo Indian girl has high regard for the Hindu domestic space which, according to her, is sanctified by the tranquil scent of incense. She says, “I feel rejuvenated when stepping into this house but my house smells of pork and liquor all the time.” In another film *Apoorvam Chilar* (Dir. Kaladharan, 1991), one of the Christian female characters reflects on her family dinners in retrospection where everybody has arguments with each other and that image offers a sharp contrast to the peaceful and pleasant Hindu household she visits.

Interestingly, the model of secular marriage seems unaffected irrespective of gender in certain cases. In the films *Elsamma Enna Aankutty* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2010), and *Om Shanti Oshana* (Dir. Jude Anthany Joseph, 2014), the storyline centres on Christian women who eschew feminine imageries in appearance and behaviour. She is a protective sister (brother!) like any other male protagonists.<sup>76</sup> The bold female characters are uninhibited in disclosing their feelings and love interest which the “feminine” lovers would not do in Malayalam cinema! They are not worried about societal norms either. Nonetheless, ultimately they are just another *aankutty* (boy) who falls for the traditional Hindu partner. Noticeably the men they opt to marry happen to be traditional

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<sup>76</sup> Elsamma in *Elsamma Enna Aankutty* wears her deceased father’s *mundu* (garment similar to *dhoti* commonly worn by men in Kerala) and shirt and Pooja in *Om Shanti Oshana* is a tomboyish girl who is loud about being so in her sartorial expressions and mannerisms. Both these films showcase instances where these females shoulder the responsibilities and voice the concerns of patriarchal morality of Malayalam cinema.

agriculturalists. They do not replicate dominant masculinity represented in films like *Lelam*, *Ezhupunnatharakan*, *Natturajavu*, and others. Thus, the seemingly rebellious female characters also are structured in the same rhetoric of the so-called Christian family movies. Thinking in this vein, agriculture becomes culture itself and it imparts legitimacy to elite caste identity.

Coming back to the stereotypical Syrian Christian family sagas on-screen, marriage does not make ripples in the narrative but it seems to add vigour to the masculine ideal. It relegates women to mere fans within; to be the loyal and complacent wife/lover who supports the hero unconditionally. By doing so, the whole discourse accentuates women's roles as the inevitable protector/ keeper of tradition. This recurring performance of an effortless Hindu-Christian marriage inside a modernity/tradition binary can be translated as the embodiment of the secular modern. And love embodies the desire to be part of the secular modern ideology which is identifiably upper caste Hindu in India. Arguably, the Hindu-Christian marriage does not perform secularity but there is a semantic logic that imparts ontological meaning to the performance of minority identity.

To frame the argument differently, the manoeuvre of a single narrative of tradition and the way it does away with the contingencies of modernity bears on the idea of self and subjectivity. By implication, this social imaginary renders the political itself as located in the "premodern" because there are no contestations of the self here. It is always already modern. Another example in a similar vein would be Gandhi's reconstruction of village as fundamental to the nation-state in India (Raguramaraju 2012: 130). The categorical use of tradition and the idea of premodern pre-empts the polyphonic history and essentializes self and subjectivity as entities emanating from homogenous empty time.

The analysis explicated how Malayalam cinema imagines an aesthetic subject predicated on discourses of tradition and modernity and the way the manifestations of this construal manufactures dominant nostalgias. This weaves a homogeneous history essentially coded in feudal registers and thereby destabilises subaltern histories. Thus the metaphors of agriculture and land are employed to conceptualize an idea of a legitimate subject and thereby an imaginary landscape of the feudal era is retained. The significance of Syrian Christian identity in the discourse lies in the way they function as agents and at the same time are situated outside modernity. It disturbs and reinstates order simultaneously. In other words, the Syrian Christian subject's moral autonomy rests on feudal value system so as not to hinder the influences caste prejudices make in the contemporary. When coming to the question of land and agrarian imaginings, it seems that though agricultural labour is no more seen as a caste/community specific chore, the attributions to it generate social imaginaries predicated on hegemonic Malayali regionalism/nationalism. That is here, Christian identity becomes the other which is required for validation of the hegemonic cultural public sphere and at the same time, it is rejected for being what it is.

In the developmental dialectic specific to Kerala, land is a metaphor of belongingness, political citizenship, and sacred geography. This differentiates subjectivities in terms of ideological and political citizenship, which find anchorage in "land." That is the reason why both Ayyer in *How Old are You?* and Udayabhanu in *Sandesham* are emotionally attached to land (region/nation) even if they do not own it in the real. The Christian subject, who constantly remains an incomplete entity striving to be within the nation, is situated in the matrix of land and legitimacy. The final scene of the film *Ezhupunna Tharakan* is emblematic of this battle between two powerful communities represented by the Syrian Christian and an erstwhile Hindu royal family.

The legal battle shown in the film for land remains unresolved till the end. Legal battle and the real battle end with the protagonist Tharakan's marriage with the scion of the rival royal family. This is symbolic of the Syrian Christian aspiration to establish superiority over the elite Hindu and take hold of the land/tradition. Both Christian family films and *Thampuran* movies apply the same logic in the design of the Christian/minority subject. The Christian hero may be the one who wins the girl, the dispute, the money, and eventually the spectator. Nonetheless, he does not succeed ultimately. His success is not as beautiful as his Hindu counterpart's success. He lacks a name, legacy, and legitimacy. The "other" identities always lack something. They are constantly striving to fill in and fit in.

The historical analysis of Christian presence in cinema underscores the absence of Christianities apart from that of Syrian Christians. What the other Christianities signify in the representative spaces seems to be remarkably diverse. Contrary to Syrian Christian identity, subaltern Christianities are limited to the religious and spiritual expressions they make and they are distanced from power and agency. The dominating presence of Syrian Christians results in the strategic manoeuvring of other communities outside as well as within so as to legitimate the subjectivity of the former. In so doing, Syrian Christian subjectivity is positioned within the larger narrative of the modern nation-state which is used to authenticate the hegemonic Hindu subjectivity.

Within Malayalam cinema, the dominant claims of Syrian Christians by and large operate as the bedrock of casteist myths and ideologies and that of developmental modernity. They function as tropes that inculcate and reinvigorate feudal order as well as categories of exclusionary politics and cultural legitimation. The mechanism is layered and multifaceted. Most important in this is the image of Christians as beneficiaries of



capitalist ethics. In conclusion, this chapter looked at Malayalam cinema and the way it accommodates the Syrian Christian identity which is at the same time the catalyst and effect of a modern developmentalist imagination of the region. The chapter tries to explain what can be termed as the political use of Syrian Christian subjectivity in Malayalam cinema where Dalits and Muslims are categorically used to evoke victimhood or villainy. And this Syrian Christian identity, as Malayalam cinema has it, elucidates the manoeuvring of the self in the face of the compromises that nation demands from its minority. For Syrian Christians, it seems to be another way of translating their hegemonic self to modular forms of minority subjectivity. And this, though antithetical to the ontology of religious self, is always appreciated and urged to convert eternally to a different, more tamable self.

This politics of the self renders them redundant and portrays them as lacking the metaphysical depth of an aesthetic subject of a visual regime. An inquiry of the cultural public sphere and the cults it weaves in would help to look at minority identities from a different and equally relevant vantage point. The next chapter examines how the sphere of popular music and the cult figure of a popular singer encapsulate a different model of representative politics pertaining to Christianity in Kerala.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Artist as Trope and Method: The Minority Question and Cultural Public Sphere**

This chapter extends the discussion by juxtaposing the registers of popular Malayalam cinema post-1990s with the discourses of art/artist-self in the public sphere. The conceptualization of a modern subject through the discourses of the popular is the key aspect in the discussion. A minority subject is produced through various discourses of political modernity including the idea of tolerance, secularism, religious co-existence etc. Therefore, the religious minority's engagement with the dominant other as well as the discourses that produce a minority necessarily foregrounds the possible explications of these ideas and expressions of one's religion which ultimately become a political activity and performance. It is in this context that the figure of the artist, who is a self enunciating subject through performance, becomes important. That is, here the performance and the appearance are taken as political events<sup>77</sup> that make the subject possible as well as offer a genealogy of the subject. Precisely, this chapter engages with the politics of minority subjectivity in the discursive terrain of art and aesthetic judgments by analyzing the case of a famous singer from Kerala, Kattassery Joseph Yesudas or K. J. Yesudas (hereafter Yesudas).

This chapter explores the potentials and possibilities of the popular icon Yesudas, who, being a Latin Christian by birth and a practising Hindu in public, defines himself as a secular human being. Thus, Yesudas's unparalleled success and reception is examined

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<sup>77</sup> I use the term "event" here to define the trajectory as well as the exposition of what has been identified as a modern subjectivity in the cultural public sphere of Kerala.

simultaneously with the history popular music culture in Malayalam and minority politics of the region. For which, the chapter takes up the category of music/musician as a trope to understand Christian subjectification in the popular spaces of Malayalam cultural imaginations. Seemingly, Yesudas embodies a space of normative self-enunciations. And, the way in which his music career and the music cultures of Kerala are defined and demarcated by it is an important phase of Christian identity politics in Kerala. Thus, Yesudas's public image is read as an anecdote in the backdrop of the significations that Christianity brings forth to the ambit of popular in Malayalam.

It has been argued that, in the sphere of representative politics, spectatorial subjectivity predicated on visual experience is “not a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists but a form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects and thereby enable who we are” (Hall 1989: 80). This spectator subject is a moment in the visual archaeology capable of making or disrupting order. In the field of film music, with the advent of the technique of “playback” singing, the culture industry imagines a listener and a spectator subject simultaneously through multiple levels of significations that involve a performer/actor on-screen, a voice that is distanced from the corporeal presence of the singer, and the invisible singer. The obscurity attached to the identity of the singer/artist, therefore, has to be investigated in ways that integrate interpretations of the visual modalities and representational aspects of voice/music. In this specific context, Yesudas is a product of cinematic imaginations of cultural identity and a part of music cultures of Kerala. Hence, the magnitude of the singer's massive popularity has to be investigated in the spectatorial imaginations of Malayalam cinema which render the interfaces of artist-self problematic. Therefore, this reading of art and the artist embarks upon deciphering the semiotics of Malayalam cinema that constructs the artist-self as a definitive category.

The sphere of art, especially those that are perceived to have discernible inflexions with Hindu religious practices and Temple art culture, had been inaccessible to both Dalit and other religious communities such as Muslims and Christians. For the same reason, art forms falling in this tradition were anathematized by other religions, albeit a few exceptions. The story of Sebastian Kunjukunju Bhagavathar, the first man to record his voice in the history of music industry in Kerala, underlines the intensity of this repugnance towards popular art forms like theatre and musical drama shared by Christian communities. The biographical work on Bhagavathar demonstrates many instances where he had to prove his loyalty towards the Church and religion (Fernandes 2005). Obviously, community authorities had been at loggerheads with his choice of being a professional singer and theatre performer. Only by being servile to community ethos and Christian religious ethics, he could get acceptance as an artist within the community. Adherence to what has been understood as a Christian moral universe seemed essential to prove his religiosity. That is, only his strong moral character and Christian values can save him from the “evil” influences of secular arts outside the Church. To draw a contrast between Bhagavathar and Yesudas; it is obvious that Bhagavathar addressed the problem of his religious self from within the community and his journey was always inwards, to the interiority of religion. Yesudas, acclaimed to prominence along with the technologies of culture industries, engaged with an imagined public of secular modern state. Here, Yesudas’s tend to move from outside of religion so much so that religion becomes an extension of his public life. In the case of Yesudas, the stigmas associated with performing arts and religious/caste identity has different manifestations which shed light on the making of the artist-self in terms of the gendered and casteist underpinnings it has.

Before coming to the discussion of on Yesudas, a genealogy of the artist in movies post-1990s is significant. Cinema, with its complex semiotic structure, is

illustrative of the way different idioms through which an idea of sacred is embedded in the subjectifications of artist-self. The examples offered here are drawn from different genres of Malayalam cinema, based on the pattern they tend to weave in the narrative of Christian presence in the sphere of representative politics at large. In the films, observably, artist's body is coterminous with tradition whereas the site of performance, practising traditions, and consumption patterns implicate the structure of the public they imagine. The body is elemental in this debate and it is the embodiment of sacred imbued with a desire for legitimacy enunciated through the language of tradition. In cinema, arguably, the shift that the artist's public and private selves undergo is pertinent in making him the legitimate subject of the discourse he is part of.

To explain this, the following section analyzes select films, especially the musicals, produced in the 1990s such as *Bharatham* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1991), *Sargam* (Dir. Hariharan, 1992), *Kudumbasametham* (Dir. Jayaraj, 1992), *Kamaladalam* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1992), and *Rajashilpi* (Dir. R. Sukumaran, 1992) etc. These films have a rather common pattern at the level of representation wherein most of them deal with struggling male artists in a feudal environment. It is not uncommon that this artist's metaphysical dilemmas are apathetic to the socio-political setting outside his feudal domesticity. What makes them problematic is the way in which the films speak for art and artist from the vantage point of universal quests on humanistic values and search for originality. That is, in the visual regime, only a Brahmin/Nair protagonist can deliver the verdicts of such quests. This is clearer when we examine the narrative structures of the films which try to philosophize artistic life from their quintessential feudal universe. This category of artist-movies/musicals tends to follow a pattern where they contemplate madness, disease, death, re-birth, immanence, sacred etc. as notions embedded in the subjective experience of the art and artist.

Further, the settings of the films are closed interiors and domestic, be it *tharavadu/naalukettu/kovilakam*<sup>78</sup> or Temple where we find the budding talents are introduced to training as well as turbulences of artistic life. The traditional caste markers of Carnatic music like *sabha*,<sup>79</sup> *kacheri* (concert), and *sangeetholsavam*<sup>80</sup> where these musicians are often found in cinema, only comes second in defining the subjectivity of the artist in these musicals. The closed space of music performance symbolized by *sabha* is translated to an interior vernacular space of cultural hegemonization, wherein the *outer* and the *other* designate rather similar meanings. Historically *kacheri* and *sabha* are ritualistic spaces and events crucial in the growth of a Carnatic musician to establish his status as an authentic classical singer. It has to be noted that, in Malayalam cinema, there are other examples of “portrait of an artist” that neither carry the tag of musicals nor falls in the category of *bildungsroman*. If the artist is a Muslim, Dalit, or a Christian, he becomes an aberration and therefore perpetuates a sense of non-belongingness. The portraits of artists they draw are tainted and mutilated images that mark incompleteness because the Christian, Muslim, or Dalit who are otherwise unqualified to carry on *Culture*, can survive only as incomplete entities. To phrase it differently, it is the incompleteness that makes them legitimate. Artist’s self is considered as excess when he is a Christian or Muslim, thus inclining to the cultural politics of hegemonic Hinduism that de-legitimizes minority identity from being heirs to art cultures of India. More mysterious in this narrative is the way in which these subjects are burdened with the obligation to “perform” in a particular way; in a particular “modern” way. They are to

<sup>78</sup> Names of upper caste residence in caste-based nomenclature.

<sup>79</sup> *Sabha*, in a literal sense, can be translated as a hall or a public. But in the registers of Carnatic music *sabha* suggests an exclusive upper caste/Brahmin public formed of Carnatic music practitioners and concertgoers and each *sabha* usually own concert halls accessible and managed by the members.

<sup>80</sup> A ceremonial festival of Carnatic music often held in Temple premises or other caste Hindu spaces. *Chembai Sangeetholsavam* held in Guruvayur, *Tyagaraja Aradhana* held in Thiruvaiyaru, and Swathi *Sangeetholsavam* held in Thiruvananthapuram are music festivals of this kind.

perform not their belongingness but rather their non-belongingness; the impossibility of *being* itself. That is, by implication, they perform their absence.

This is the reason why the portrayal of “other” artist-self is laced with aberrations indicative of his impossible existence to the field of music/art. The film *His Highness Abdullah* (Dir Sibi Malayil, 1990) is an important text in this respect. The film is an unparalleled ensemble of community politics of art as well as minority politics of modern nation-state in India. The simple plot of the movie has intricate undertones of community politics, sanitization of art cultures, and hegemonic narratives on originality and taste in music. The character Abdullah in the much acclaimed musical is emblematic of the mutations these politics at different levels. The movie is set in the interiors of a fictional Udayanapuram Palace; the royal residence of an erstwhile king Maharaja Udayavarma. This central character in the film Udayavarma, an aged erstwhile king of the region still lives with all the pomp and rituals, even in sartorial expressions, unlike other family members who are modernized and prefer to reside in urban spaces.

Persuaded by the prospects of a good sum to pay off his debts, Abdullah, a gifted vocalist, becomes an assassin in disguise, hired by Udayavarma’s own family members to kill the old man. And Abdullah enters the palace as Ananthan Namboodiri. The rest of the film is about his life in the palace and how he wins Udayavarma’s heart through his music. Eventually, it is revealed to the king and the conspirators that Abdullah is no murderer but the son of a poor Muslim musician who was coaxed into the idea of being a hired killer. At the end of much confusion and commotion, everything is put into place – the conspirators are expelled from the palace and the childless king accepts Abdullah as the new heir to the throne and the groom-to-be to his adopted daughter. And thus the narrative ends on a happy note.

As the film suggests, though Abdullah is not an aristocrat real life, he is a man of high principles fitting for a Namboodiri, in contrast with the real members of the royal family. But for Abdullah, his religion is a stigma and disgrace. However, towards the end of the narrative, the magnanimous king forgives the goodhearted Abdullah and makes him his heir. Abdullah is an exception and simultaneously inside the structure, thus sanctioning his subordination to it. The lengthy speech the king makes before he announces his willingness to forgive Abdullah is pertinent here. The king proclaims that a Brahmin is someone who has the knowledge of *Brahma*<sup>81</sup> which is in abundance in Abdullah in the form of his knowledge of (Carnatic) music. By implication, Abdullah's legitimacy comes from the hegemonic Brahminism which places the Carnatic music in the "proper place" by appropriating the Muslim singer into the sanitized space of feudal patronage. Nonetheless, the climax scene shows nothing but a decorative throne laid empty as the king walks away leaving the space and the possessions he holds for the prospective couple to take over. This is axiomatic of the cultural logic of Malayalam popular cinema which has neo-feudal publics and Hindu secularism. Precisely, the king disappears but the throne remains and permeates its incorporeal regime to modern institutions.

The film *Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal* has Roy Thomas, the protagonist who is continuously ridiculed and criticized by many including his father Kochuthoma, his wife Bhavana, and later by a film director (whom he approaches during an audition) for his frivolous nature and for not having the substance to become an actor. Roy, from being an irresponsible dilettante, grows into a mature householder and challenges all who had made fun of him before. It is only when he proved his potential to eke out a living from a

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<sup>81</sup> *Brahma* indicates the scriptural knowledge of Hinduism and understanding of divine as well as the Hindu lord Brahma.



career other than theatre, his father, who expelled him from home for marrying a lower caste girl, acknowledge his creative potentials. Roy is recognized as the hero only after being a successful professional. His acceptance in the family and his responsibilities are entwined to assert the conditions within which Roy can call himself an artist. Here, becoming a typical Christian entrepreneur and the erasure of his anarchist-artist-self happens simultaneously and this transformation seems imperative in defining Roy's "true" self. In a later appearance, the same director who had rejected Roy in an audition repeats Kochuthoma's opinion (to the reformed Roy) and offers him a role in his next movie. Apparently, Roy's another "disgrace" – his marriage with the non-Christian lower caste woman – is also pardoned and normalized by his return to his role of a connoisseur of capital. The transformation, in other words, is a re-Christianization of Roy, the prodigal son of the family. Here, Roy can never take up the role of an anarchist artist, which has been a celebrated stereotyped figure of the artist in Kerala, exemplified in the film *Artist* (Dir. Shyamaprasad, 2013).<sup>82</sup> The artist in *Artist* is romantically involved with a Brahmin girl Gayathri. But as luck would not have it, they part ways at the very moment Michael Angelou, the artist in the movie, tastes success, giving an abrupt ending to their relationship as well as the story. The way even the adapted movie takes in the pattern of the popular is intriguing. In the grammar of Malayalam popular cinema, the success of the hero is often attached with the sense of completeness established through a narrative unity and poetic justice. There would not be any loose ends. In *Artist* too the image of the triumphant male seems unabated but the success of the artist is downplayed and is made devoid of narrative totality. In the final twist of the plot, it is shown that the opinionated and angry artist Michael Angelou coldheartedly disowns his partner Gayathri and her predicaments. The moment the artist proves his substance, the moral compass of

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<sup>82</sup> The film is an adaptation of the novel *Dreams in Prussian Blue* by Paritosh Uttam.

the movie alters and now it posits a question about the moral fibre of Michael Angelou, the man who fails to understand his partner. When reading in tune with the observations made on Christian male characters who marry Hindu girl/tradition (as explained in Chapter two), Michael's failure to understand his partner is ultimately the failure of the artist in him. The value models emphasized and the crisis of the "other" (Michael Angelou) in the plot, point to the larger politics on caste, religious identity, and identifications of the artist-self working here. Like in the case of *Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal*, it is the artist-self of the protagonist that dictates the decisive arbitrariness of being. To take another instance; in the film *Thanthonni* (Dir. George Varghese, 2010), the protagonist's artist father is invisible and "dead" until he emerges as the successful businessman, reclaiming his lost fortunes, and thereby retaining his status both inside the family and in the social structure. The Christian subjectivity represented in this film, thus present another extension of the popular images of Christian in Kerala.

Further, there are films where we find aspiring artists who do not have cannons to claim and are outside the feudal patronage. And they habitually become the jokers to evoke laughter largely for their misplaced emotions and aspirations. The turns these characters take are interesting to read along with the politics of representations discussed earlier. In the slapstick comedy *Marykkundoru Kunjadu* (Dir. Shafi, 2010), the protagonist Solomon is a timid, uneducated man who dreams of becoming a film director. According to his family, he whiles away time daydreaming. Solomon's family and the society treat him with contempt for his cowardice and negligence towards household responsibilities "in spite of being the only boy child of the family." Further, Solomon refuses his father's pleas to assist him as the altar boy of the local church, saying that it is detrimental for the artist in him and thus he cannot oblige. Contrary to other popular cinema where the hero inevitably comes out of his flaws, here, neither could Solomon

win the hand of his love interest nor would his family be saved from a plot by their family foe, lest a saviour-big brother steps into the family scene. This mighty brother, who was actually a thief in hiding, eventually becomes family and acts as the masculine brother in place of the less masculine Solomon.

Similarly, in the film *Amen* (Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery, 2013) the male lead, named Solomon here as well, is a timid saxophone player. Solomon had to publicly compete with another music band in order to sustain his native church's (the Kumarankary Church) musical tradition (St. Geevarghese band) and to marry the girl he loves. He ultimately wins and unites with his lover and gives a happy ending to the film. However, in the last scene, the audience is shown that the priest who intervened in the problems and provided support for Solomon and the band is none other than the Saint himself. This support from the supernatural offers other interpretations to the way in which Solomon is presented in the narrative. Only a miracle could save Solomon, the artist. This means the almighty itself has to appear instead of a mighty brother. Both the Solomon characters expose the lack their identities are marked with, reprising the rhetoric of the impossible artist. Malayalam film *Five Star Hospital* (Dir. Thaha, 1997) ascertains this common sense of the impossible musician through another aspect of identity politics. The cinema works through the political unconscious of the hegemonic modern Malayali many a time.

This unconscious constructs the body of the singer essentially in line with the hegemonic idea of ritual purity and body hygiene. This overt emphasis on cleanliness articulated through the singer-protagonist alludes to the histories of sanitization of performance traditions including music culture in south India. The narrative focuses on the character Raphael, an aspiring singer and the son of a butcher, Carlos, who makes a living from selling meat. The film pictures Raphael's father as an uneducated and tough

village man who scorns Raphel for not eating meat, the staple food of his Christian family. Raphel is shown as critiquing animal slaughtering, preferring a vegetarian diet, and nurturing the secret desire to learn Carnatic music instead of assisting his father. Eventually, he becomes an acclaimed singer and in the course of time it is revealed that Raphel was the son of a Brahmin doctor Subalakshmi and Carlos was his foster father. And the cinema ends with the inevitable reunion of the mother and son. Strikingly, the final scene with the happy son and mother is complemented by Carlos's decision to shut down his butcher shop and instead he makes Raphel inaugurate his new shop that sells only "pure milk, butter, and yoghurt." The shift from animal slaughtering to pure milk products through the political use of Brahminical ideologies of food is imperative in making both music and the Christian self equally problematic. The notions of purity and pollution encoded in food culture and the way these construct notions of cultural legitimacy and artistic potential is axiomatic here. Raphel's choice of food and taste in music are transformed to the moral edifice of nation itself when read in the context of contemporary discourses on the politics of food.

Precisely, when we observe the artist in Malayalam cinema, a Christian, Muslim, or Dalit can never fully become one. They canonically become the metaphor for lack and unfulfilled desire. They always endorse submissive masculinity dwarfed by their Hindu counterparts when it comes to their artist-selves, which render them incomplete perennially. The lack in their identity chases them in pursuit of the unfulfilled. The other – in this context, the Christian self – is the impossible artist in cinema. He is just another spectator within. The real master/performer is in some other place that is inaccessible to the aspiring artist. It is against this rhetoric of Malayalam cinema that I study Yesudas and his phenomenal presence in structuring the music culture, minority identity, and public domain of Kerala. His journey to become an iconic singer and metaphor of secular

modern Kerala appears to secede from the trajectory of the artist in the cinematic representations of the artist. My point of departure in this discussion is precisely this position of Yesudas to understand what it makes of his art and his religion to tackle the way his religious identity becomes the model of minority identity.

### **K. J. Yesudas and the History of Popular Music in Malayalam**

Yesudas is the most popular singer in the field of Malayalam popular music, with a successful career spanning over 50 years. His father being a passionate musician, Yesudas received formal training in music at a very early age. Later, he pursued music as a profession and attended RLV College Thrippunithura and Swathi Thirunal College of Music. He began his career as a substitute to his father in Carnatic music concerts but earnestly tried his luck in playback singing and eventually rose into prominence by the 1960s. Born in a Latin Catholic family in the southern region of Kerala, Kochi, Yesudas often speaks about his initial hurdles in being acknowledged as a singer and often quotes his experiences of humiliations, as to how he bitterly encountered the question, “*Mappilaykkevide sangeetham?*” (“How can a Christian have the sense of music?”) Nevertheless, the singer outlived such criticisms to become the cult figure of Malayali cultural legacy and icon of secular modern Kerala.

The 1950s and the 1960s are very important decades for Malayalam music industry in terms of the technological and structural changes in both the production and spectatorial patterns of the film form. Yesudas’ itinerary to become the voice of the singing hero in Malayalam cinema marks the emergence of a specific language of secularism debates and community politics in Kerala. In fact, no discussion about the singer goes without commenting on his sympathetic religious views. Many of them identify Yesudas as a man of exemplary worldviews in view of his religious

temperament. In that sense, Christianity thus claims to be legitimately called “the tolerant religion” personified in Yesudas! This image of the singer and the premises within which his voice is legitimized become the entry point to the discussion on minority identity in particular. In order to understand the trajectory of the sculpting of this secular ideal, the following section analyzes the connection between and the discourses of modernity and secularity pertaining to the Malayalam speaking community and the different and at times contesting histories.

*Mathrubhumi* weekly came out with a cover story in March 2010, saying “25 *Varshangalkku Shesham Yesudasinodu Zachariah Maappu Chodikkunnu*” (“After 25 years, Zachariah apologizes to Yesudas”). The article titled, “*Ente Gayaka, Ennodu Porukkuka...*” (“Oh, Dear Singer, Forgive Me...”) by the famous writer and cultural critic Paul Zachariah<sup>83</sup> is a sequel and afterthought to the critical piece on Yesudas that the writer had published earlier in 1992. The article is a lengthy statement of apology where the author withdraws everything he had said earlier about the singer and proclaims that he had mistaken in comprehending the magnificent personality that the singer is. The first article, that Zachariah regrets having written, laments the deterioration in the field of popular music and the entire music culture of the region. The article under the title, “*Yesudasinte Kalajeevitham Innu*” (“Yesudas’ Life in Art Today”) examines the changes in popular music culture in Kerala in the wake of “mechanical reproduction.” Zachariah’s critique ponders mainly on the essentialized notions about musical sound, apprehensions about the new idea of playback singing as a fast-growing economy monopolized by Yesudas. Important in it was the singer’s strategic use of a secularist multi-religious identity to engage with the traditional and modern spaces of music.

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Zachariah is a noted writer and cultural critic in Kerala. He had faced much resentment because of his outright criticisms on Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and institutional religiosity.

Surprisingly, the second essay, an arresting defence of Yesudas in all respects, is a carefully crafted piece of writing to erase even the possibility of any criticism that can mount against the singer. In the second article, even though absolutely nothing had changed in terms of the earlier criticisms raised by the Zachariah, Yesudas becomes the unparalleled metaphor of secularism and universal human virtue. This time, the author has freed his object of analysis from all the metaphysical concerns about the singer, song, and the singer's burden of enunciating and rejuvenating Malayali music culture. In other words, he replaced the moral compass of the singer with another sphere of politics: the politics of secular nationalism where Zachariah crowns Yesudas as the champion of secularism in Kerala.

In the following year, 2011 Kerala celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> year (golden jubilee) of the music career of Yesudas, which was excessively made public through print, television, and electronic media and public events. One of the leading dailies in Malayalam, *Malayala Manorama*'s online portal had allotted a very interesting section exclusively for Yesudas titled *50 Paattuvarshangal* (50 Song Years) with numerous links to his life, career, and biographical notes written in allegorical overtones by his contemporary singers, family, and so on. Among them, one particular section gives the readers "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," as the caption says, where a reader can post one question to which the portal claims, Yesudas would reply personally. The tagline goes thus: "You must have had that question within you for a long time, the one that you wanted to ask your beloved *Gandharva*<sup>84</sup> since forever, and which has never been asked by anyone

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<sup>84</sup> Yesudas is fondly called *Gaana Gandharvan* (*Gandharva* of Music or The Singing God). *Gandharvas* are believed to be heavenly beings with magnificent musical skills. In folklore, they are associated with desire and sexuality and appear as male nature spirits also. In Hindu mythology, *Gandharvas* are the messengers between gods and humans.

else.” This statement evidently explains the agentive potential Yesudas has in cultivating a memory and authoring a history through it.

The evolution of singer into a celestial divine figure is necessarily attached to the history of popular music in Kerala in terms of its industrial and emotional economies. The following section examines the way these emotional economies and the mythification of singer form a category of sacred-secular in Malayalam popular space. Such moments underline the all-pervasive influence the singer has in Kerala public sphere and presumably; excessively emotive responses and the popularity of the singer conjure up, proclaim, and champion what has been conceived as “the heroic” in popular Malayalam cinema. The expressions employed to sketch the artist emphatically state the emotive responses embedded in a language of nostalgia articulated simultaneously through the voice and its author. It is the cultivation of personal memory, idea of cultural modernity, and symbolism of social transformation that imparts meaning to the signifier Yesudas. The process of cultivating personal memory in order to facilitate collective consciousness and symbolic language of cultural artefacts is worth examining to understand the meaning of religion in the language of cultural productions. To analyze the frames within which this imaginary is constructed, it is important to go through the contexts of these responses. What makes a Christian singer popular in the discourse of secularism and political modernity of the region and what does it do to the discourses on minority subjectivities in the process? This can be explained by considering three aspects in the making of Yesudas: the pre-eminence of traditionalism axiomatic in the singer’s adulation for Carnatic music traditions, the visual language that popularized the voice of Yesudas in the history of Malayalam cinema, and debates of secularism and the spectacle of it.



### **The Popular and the Sacred: Archives, Discourses, and Publics**

In south India, aesthetic judgments and taste have been a sight of engagement with the idea of modernity that resulted in the structural reorganization of the art forms and performance practices.<sup>85</sup> The rhetoric of modernity, apparently, obliterates many political underpinnings of the restructuring of various performing art practices in south India especially in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, music culture has not been an inventory to imagine nation and modernity in Kerala unlike in the case of other art forms such as cinema. However, one cannot do away with the politics behind the establishment of Carnatic music as “the classical music” of south India in the discussion about a popular singer who attaches his versatility to this classical tradition and hegemony of Carnatic music. Therefore, locating the pathways of the cult of Yesudas inevitability requires the “classical” politics of Carnatic music and its engagements with the idea of popular.

The role of art cultures in consolidating canons of tradition and a nationalist sentiment is also not an insignificant phase of Indian media history. The attempts to codify “the Indian culture” from “substandard” contents had started right from the beginning of technologically equipped dissemination of art forms where art became the cultural edifice of Indian nationalism. All India Radio (AIR), one of the foremost institutions engaged in popular communication and dissemination of cultural productions – specifically music since its inception – has been devoted in this pursuit of finding appropriate content that can contain national interests and aspirations according to their imaginations (Lelyveld 1998). In the formative period, although the selection of contents was not a centralized process capable of making extensive networks among different

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<sup>85</sup> See Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Daves Soneji (2008).

music cultures, it effectively authenticated the religious Hindu aspect in the so-called classical traditions and filtered other practising traditions such as Gharana and Hindustani. This is because these traditions have associations with the Muslim cultural legacy and therefore are imagined to be at variance with the kind of national culture AIR wanted to project and the cultural repertoire they represented (Lelyveld 1998: 55). The categorical exclusion of Urdu-Hindustani traditions of music because of their affiliations with Islamic cultural spectrums and religious practices in the institutional systems has to be investigated from this perspective.

In south India, discourses of modernity vastly re-structured systems of performing art forms of dance and music where religion, caste, and community played vital roles in the process. How the sanitization and Sanskritization processes transformed the dance forms of south India in terms of the formal and thematic restructuring exemplifies this event in their evolutionary history.<sup>86</sup> The changes in performing art cultures of south India largely focused on reform which attempted to cleanse the caste and community specificities and histories of these art forms. Attempts to revive “classical” art forms – especially dance and music – of south India in this period proposed a reformed aesthetics of modernity which is clearly Brahminic in nature. Similar movements in the field of Carnatic music in the early twentieth century has contributed to its inventive classical status, which has been widely discussed on the grounds of its implications for gender, caste, and regional politics.<sup>87</sup> Reform in Carnatic music was aimed at cleansing the song and the singer from the material inquiries to metaphysical one and to adorn them with

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<sup>86</sup> For a detailed discussion on this point, see C. S. Lakshmi (2003: xviii-xlvii), Daves Soneji (2012), and Ketu H. Katrak (2011: 26-37).

<sup>87</sup> Extensive Studies of C. S. Lakshmi (2003), Lakshmi Subramanyam (2006), J. S. George (2004), and Amanda Weidman (2007) delineate this point.

embellishments of *bhakti* conceived in the language of Brahminic religious ideology.<sup>88</sup>

This categorically established Carnatic musician essentially as part of the Brahmin aesthetics and episteme and eventually Carnatic music became the bastion of Brahmins. The new respectability music earned henceforth has begun to affiliate itself to upper caste ideology. This movement accountable for major shifts in conceptualizations and reform in Carnatic music hegemonized it as “the classical” music of South India.

The institutional moves in AIR (All India Radio) echoes such revivalist projects and AIR’s ideological patrons viewed Hindustani as adulterations to the “pure” Hindu-Sanskrit traditions and tried to obliterate them from performing spaces (Lelyveld 1998: 55). Simultaneously, the attempts to weave out an authentic, classical south Indian music catered to gender, religion, and caste specific exclusive spaces, stringently denouncing the erotic contents. This political move precipitated a whole period of Brahmin superiority even when it moved away from *sabha* to modern public concert halls. The value systems indoctrinated in the process remained the reference point of “authentic” music produced in south Indian languages of Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu, where Carnatic music had a successful itinerary. In Malayalam popular cinema, when a typical Hindu family space is shown, the women characters are typically presented as giving music or dance lessons often at the veranda or yard of the huge *tharavadu*, *naalukettu*, or palace. This appears as an easy display of the religion and domestic space within which the plot is set, keeping in pace with contentions of Malayalam cinema on artistry and cultural identity. This private space becomes significant in the preservation and practice of religion and tradition (music), as identified by Partha Chatterjee in the tradition-modernity discourse in the nationalist movement in India (1994).

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<sup>88</sup> The sanitization process of classical arts in south India involved major changes in content and form which wiped off the erotic undertones and bodily connotations and replaced it with overtly religious elements like devotion/*bhakti*.

Music needs to be archived in order to claim a history of its own as Janaki Bakhle notes in her work on Indian music traditions (2005: 7). Digital archives including web portals, blogs, and social networking sites offer spaces for sharing and keeping personal archives of dialogic nature. In Kerala, apparently, film songs remain to be an archive of social imaginaries on region and to cultivate a sense of past among its people. The virtual landscapes often function as an active repository of popular memory which has a wider appeal among migrant communities like diasporic Malayali communities in Europe and the Middle East. Popular music in Malayalam has a significant space that deals with the experience of expatriate life and their imaginations on land and region.<sup>89</sup> This space of technological modernity has created ways of imagining nation therein. In the same way, contemporary print culture in Malayalam is symptomatic of the historicizing of film music to cater to a sense of past and regionalism through music. The proliferation of articles on the dynamic genre of film music that trace back the idea of region to the formative period of Malayalam cinema and popular film songs is emblematic of this. Widely circulated periodicals *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, *Madhyamam Weekly*, *Samakalika Malayalam Weekly*, and *Bhashaposhini* magazine have been publishing articles on film music in terms of its aesthetic and industrial aspects. This literature appears to weave in a cultural history through the idioms of the popular; the archive of these writings range from personal letters and memoirs to popular memory and hearsay. This metanarrative of *culture* engages with cultural historiography from the vantage point of the popular.

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<sup>89</sup> Migration, exile and expatriate life triggered many imaginations of idea of region, sense of past and imaginings of community in Malayalam popular scene. Predominantly, the Middle Eastern migrant community contributed to inculcate a Malayali migrant memory in cultural imaginations specifically through music. They have had considerable influence in structuring an aesthetics of its own. The songs “Nalikerathinte Naattil” from the movie *Thurakkatha Vathil* (Unopened Door, Dir. P. Bhaskaran, 1970), and “Mamalakkalkkappurathu” from *Ninamaninja Kaalpadukal* (Bloodstained Footsteps, Dir. N. N. Pisharody, 1963) are examples of this invocations on imaginary homelands.

*Mathrubhumi Weekly*, one of the widely circulated literary magazines in Malayalam, has been publishing serialized articles on veteran musicians, singers, lyricists, etc. And the publishers claimed that this modality of the popular that historicize the popular would cater to the taste of the new reading public. As the editor Kamalram Sajeev recalls in his introduction to Ravi Menon's work *Mozhikalil Sangeethamayi (In a Language Melodious)*:

When I took charge of *Mathrubhumi Weekly* six years back, the primary challenge was to meet the needs of a drastically transformed reading public. The severing of the roots of tradition must not happen when launching something pristine. *Mathrubhumi weekly* introduced two columns “*Pattezhuthu*”<sup>90</sup> and “*Charithrapatham*”<sup>91</sup> as the two bridges between generations. (my trans.; Sajeev 2010: x)

The infusion of popular and mainstream literary public is suggestive of a condition that necessitates and establishes a sense of tradition mediated through the discourse of popular. Consequently, a narrative history of popular music has become a legitimate part of cultural historiography. Here, it can be argued that the new interest in historicizing the popular/music has bearings on a sense of past articulated through visual memory and Yesudas marks an important phase in the process. For instance, the language of these works, mainly that of Ravi Menon – who pioneered this new wave by popularizing it through Malayalam periodicals – kindle nostalgic and emotional responses towards the formation of this idea of history. Within this spasm of overtly inflated images of musicians and singers, an entire work was written on the “myths and legends” on Yesudas by Ravi Menon titled *Athishayaragam (The Wondrous Raga, 2011)*. In that

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<sup>90</sup> Notes on Music.

<sup>91</sup> Pathways of History.

work, Yesudas's image wards off criticisms of any kind thereby making him truly the celestial figure of *Gandharva* – the name Yesudas has been fondly called after. The irony lies in its meaning where *Gandharva* itself stands for an omnipresent absence. It is in this context that the politics in the making of what Yesudas is today necessitates an understanding of the “classical” and the “popular” meanings of his voice read against the political history of Kerala. Music cultures across India are categorized as classical, folk, and a third space of the popular which is an inclusive space for many genres best exemplified in the film music. Many folk music genres are associated with specific religious-caste-community practices and rituals and film music borrow from both “classical” and folk traditions. For instance, film music incorporates ideas of *bhakti* that come from Carnatic music tradition as well as erotic significations that are outside of its present form. For that reason, the politics of popular music as an ideology is kernel in its study in terms of the consumption and reception of it.

Further, the analysis of the cult figure of the singer Yesudas will be incomplete without considering the political economy of popular music and religious public sphere of Kerala. Accordingly, the birth of a new listening subject predicated on visual experience is fundamental in establishing the singer's secular musings invincible in the cultural public sphere of contemporary Kerala. The first music reality show aired in *Kairali TV* in 2000, first of its kind ever in Malayalam television industry, to be followed by countless similar programs, was emphatically named after *Gandharva Sangeetham* in honour of Yesudas. It is not unnatural for *Kairali TV*, the first channel owned by a Left party in Kerala – the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM) – to name their music reality show as a tribute to the much celebrated icon of secularism in Kerala. With the highly successful music reality shows that appeared in many other private channels thereafter, the hitherto existent distant auditory experience of music had been replaced by visual

presentations of the real-time singers. The primacy attributed to spectacles of “performance” in these reality shows and the imaginations of spectatorial subjectivity within signals the new avenues wherein a singer’s self is modulated and monitored. By saying so, I do not argue that *Gandharva Sangeetham* is the inaugural moment of an experience of visuality in music. But, on the other hand, this could be the moment in history that triggered the possibilities of looking at the genealogy of visual repertoire through music cultures of the language. The community politics of Yesudas’s popular image/music explicitly became a discourse after the 1990s and it signals the religious and community identifications of the singer as well as the spectatorial imaginations of the visual publics. That is, Yesudas seems to break new ground in the conceptualizations of spectator subject of Malayalam cinema by embodying a discourse that contests the idea of an unmarked listening subject. Thus, the singer is instrumental in unmaking the myth of the popular as such by dislodging the unidentified listener from its discourse. The listening public, arguably, is identified as an important political category at this moment.

The following section scrutinizes how Yesudas could transcend the frontiers of film music and how music becomes a performative experience of self-articulation in him. The genre of popular music is innately connected to political mobilizations in Kerala at various points in History. The concept of political poetry, which draws heavily from folk music traditions, evolved under the tutelage of left-wing political organs in Kerala is illustrative of this connection. Songs used in theatre productions of *Kerala People’s Arts Club* (KPAC)<sup>92</sup> falls in this category and illustrate instances of ideological manoeuvring.<sup>93</sup> This genre of *viplavagaanangal* (revolution songs) finds a prominent

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<sup>92</sup> KPAC was a prominent theatre group in Kerala which started functioning in 1950s under the auspicious of theatre enthusiasts having allegiance to communist ideals.

<sup>93</sup> Nissim Mannathukaren (2013) argues that cultural elements like music and folk arts have been used by the communists in Kerala that eventually contributed to the formations of a national-popular will in Kerala.

place in the progressive theatre group of KPAC that staged plays intended to “educate the masses.” Anything that failed to appeal to this political sensibility of the left and dissociate with the language of social commitment was considered *painkili*. That is the reason why Changampuzha<sup>94</sup> poetry, which celebrates corporeal love and its deeply subjective experiences, instantly became *painkili*.

Paul Zachariah, in another instance, says, “P. Bhaskaran freed poetry from classicism and directed it towards popular sensibilities. This led to the establishment of a subaltern experience of the rural in poetry, drifting apart from the romantic fantasies of the pastoral village life found in Changampuzha” (my trans.; P. Zachariah 2008: 38-39). It dislodged itself from both Sanskritized poetry and romantic idealism of Changampuzha and claimed political responsibility with a newly formed working class consciousness seemingly contesting both Changampuzha and Sanskrit poetry (P. Zachariah 2008: 39). P. Bhaskaran, who penned the songs of *Neelakkuyil* (Dir. P. Bhaskaran and Ramu Karyat, 1954), pioneered this movement and extended the meaning of political poetry to the lexis of film songs. *Neelakkuyil* is part of “social realist” cinema, a movement spearheaded by directors and writers like Ramu Karyat, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, P. Bhaskaran and the like. It is in this social realist movie that the attempts to make original Malayalam songs – contrary to the hitherto practice of copying and improvising music from the already established Hindi film industry – successfully reached cinemas.

In the political imaginations of the time, the idea of the modern Malayali found anchorage in communist ideals. Apparently, this has created a space where communist imaginations in Malayalam cinema constructed a modern Malayali identity (essentially male). This masculine imagination was embodied in Sathyan (the screen name of Manuel

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<sup>94</sup> Changampuzha Krishna Pillai (1911-1948), popularly known as Changampuzha was a Malayalam poet and one of the pioneers of romanticism in Malayalam poetry.



Sathyaneshan), the prominent actor of the time to become the leftist, working class masculine figure (Radhakrishnan 2006: 135). Prem Nazir (the screen name of Abdul Khader), Sathyan's equally famous counterpart in cinema, offered a sharp contrast to this figure since Nazir commonly performed the romantic hero and squandering playboy, singing and dancing to court young wealthy women visibly suggesting an upper caste lifeworld. Nazir represented the polished urban-male-romantic idol in contrast to the raw, tough, and dark-skinned male representing the working class. A significant aspect of this period pertaining to the analysis is that Yesudas had been identified as the appropriate voice for Nazir, not for Sathyan. Kamalram Sajeev, the one who showed great journalistic enthusiasm in the history of Malayalam film music, states in reminiscence, "it did not take much time for me to realize that singer Yesudas is nobody else but my hero of silver screen Nazir, whom I often meet at Megha Talkies" (my trans.; Sajeev viii). That is, the singer gives voice not to the left revolutionary but to the romantic hero's emotional and metaphysical pursuits. Ironically, at variance with the sacrality imparted to his music in later years, Yesudas' voice had been appropriated by the singing hero who characteristically belonged to the genre of *painkili*.

Seemingly, Yesudas's journey from celebrity to celestial; or that of from *painkili* to *Gaanagandharvan* (*Gandharva* of Music) facilitated the fluid space of apolitical elite masculine citizen of modern Kerala. This is evident from the singer's mediations where, even when keeping his public profile extremely political for his use of the term *mathetharam* (secular), he carefully stays away from the political.<sup>95</sup> The singer's controversial sexist and anti-feminist comments,<sup>96</sup> his careful detachment from politics

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<sup>95</sup> According to Engin F. Isin; "Becoming political is that moment when the naturalness of the dominant virtues is called into question and their arbitrariness revealed" (2002: 275).

<sup>96</sup> A] "Yesudas strikes a sour note with comments on women's attire," *The Hindu*, October 3, 2014. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/women-wearing-jeans-is-against-indian-culture-yesudas/article6468763.ece>

and reluctance to respond to politics as such underline this observation. Here, his repeated use of the expression secular implies empty or rather a deceptive signifier devoid of any kind of political sensibility. Thus, Yesudas propelled a different way of conceiving region and nation when he reciprocated the voice of an imagined “Malayali everydayness” that had already been in the making then. This collective unconscious predicated on aesthetic judgments and tastes offered the symbolic energies that constructed the middle class-upper caste experiences of modernity specific to Kerala. Thus, Yesudas signifies a political that stands against the much celebrated political will of the region which is often associated with the communist pasts of Kerala.

The study on the singer’s real-time as well as cinematic performances is pertinent to understand the nuances of the singer’s performance. Yesudas’s visual presentations emphasize the significance of the body right from his cameo appearances in movies to his on-stage persona in various contexts. That is, at a time when voice with its technological backups can aspire to break away from the body of the singer, Yesudas negated this possibility and adhered to patterned appearance. He starts with the same *sloka* as a ritualistic performance in all his stage performances and uses similar white clothes and standardized tonal compositions, and this programmed presentation dictates a normative space for popular music. This normativity has political implications since body, music, sound, religion, and community identity can be imperative in putting the sphere of popular in the paradigm of hegemonic art culture. This normativity also alludes to the premeditated “sacred space” for the singer as well as his music. In India, white clothes are sartorial expressions of asceticism, saintliness, and renouncer in both mainstream Hindu

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B] Revathi Sajeevan, “Singer Yesudas’ remarks on ‘selfie culture’ spark controversy,” *IndiaToday*, January 3, 2017. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/singer-yesudas-remarks-selfie-culture-controversy-jeans-comment/1/848252.html>

and Christian religious traditions. Yesudas's pure white attire and the noticeable emphasis on keeping himself devout attach music to the metaphors of sacrifice, asceticism, and spiritual abstinence and thereby to dominant religiosity (Pampirikkunnu 2013: 46). In view of the history of Carnatic music traditions, this preoccupation with the idea of sacred in one way sets limits to the popular and tend to see it as an extension of the sacred canons of art. Thus, this is symptomatic of Yesudas's contested stance within the ambit of popular as an epistemic tradition. Arguably, these allusions of the sacred serve as a metaphor and method to invoke canonic tradition in popular.

Further, the way the domain of popular music is implicated by the self-declared Carnatic legacy of the singer which is evident in his idiosyncratic diction and renditions of film songs is another point to be discussed here. In Paul Zachariah's critique on Yesudas, one of the crucial criticisms is about the singer's self-articulation which, according to the author, is visibly superfluous and hegemonic in nature. This led to essentialized ideas of musical voice and tonal compositions in Malayalam playback singing, which were otherwise diverse and multifaceted; adds Paul Zachariah (1992: 79-80). Arguably, Yesudas is instrumental in the re-structuring of listening culture of Kerala with his soft tonal compositions that replaced the then familiarized masculine voice that the listening public had been accustomed to, say the bass sound of male singers like Kamukara Purushothaman.

Apparently, Yesudas's intervention is also instrumental in the emergent linguistic nationality of the region observable in the Malayalam cinema of the time. These movements were trying to make a distinct *Malayaliness* through many modes wherein new production houses and regional studios were aspiring for such relocations in all fields of filmmaking. The transformations in the field of cinema involved attempts to shift the

epicentre of south Indian film industry, from Madras, and thereby bringing a regional geography, original music score, and “pure Malayalam” on-screen. Yesudas seemed to be instrumental in these movements in constructing what can be defined as the standard Malayalam. He epitomized refined tongue by authoring a “standard pronunciation” with a heavy influence of Sanskritized sounds. This influence of Sanskrit negated the regional variants of Malayalam peculiar to the first generation singers with sonic particularities typical of a Malayalam-Tamil *mélange* (Pampirikkunnu 2013: 47). This is also important considering the historical premises within which the construction of Tamil subjectivity as an inferior other to make a hegemonic Malayali identity possible. This is language politics surface throughout in defining what is referred as the linguistic nationality in the region. The nuances of language politics will be discussed in next chapter.

The Sanskritized sounds were filtered through Yesudas’s training in Carnatic music and for him, Carnatic music is the “pure form of music of our culture” which is the basis for all kinds of music that sustains. The singer himself often draws examples from his personal life where he describes how his granddaughter enjoys Carnatic music at a very young age. According to him, this points towards the inherent capacity of human beings to enjoy “classical” (Carnatic) music (Yesudas). These self-articulations attest the argument that; even when sticking on to popular, Yesudas’s sound modulations are within the already defined canons of Carnatic music, which is considered the “classical music” of south India (Pampirikkunnu 2013: 44). This has been perceived as a major transformation in Malayalam playback singing. The monopoly of Yesudas’ flat and smooth voice pushed back not only the Tamil inflexions but also other voices that have roots in folk and minor music traditions. By doing so, the singer simply infused the community-specific music genres like *pulluvanpattu* with his knowledge and systematic training in Carnatic music (Gopalakrishnan 2012: 36-37). In short, the singer successfully

filtered the regional, community specificities of language. It has been observed that this obliteration of community voices from music could be the reason why singers like Kalabhavan Mani<sup>97</sup> was more appealing to the downtrodden communities where they find it easy to identify with Mani's music than that of Yesudas (Pampirikkunnu 2013: 44). Another point to be noted here is the different reception Yesudas had for his devotional songs. Yesudas has many Hindu devotional songs to his credit that are extensively used in Temples across Kerala. On the contrary, though Yesudas has sung many Christian devotional songs, the singer does not seem to enjoy such a privileged place within a Christian religious public. Obviously, it is impossible to gauge the qualitative differences and their cognitive connections with religious publics, but the music's different publics can signify the meanings Yesudas correspond in each of them. Apparently, the less-popular minor voices seem more attractive in the context of Christian community worship<sup>98</sup> whereas the heavily Sanskritized songs of Yesudas find greater appreciation from his Hindu devotees.

As discussed earlier, *bhakti* became a dominant theme in Carnatic music through the many revivalist movements. Introduction of a new scientificism of methodical schemata which that adhere to stringent rules and strictures was central to this process. And this scientificism, which delimited the genre, was decisive in establishing the notions of sacrality within. This sense of scientific rationality imparted to Carnatic music made it possible to translate its genealogies into a sacred history and religious epistemology. This normative system of high art thus invalidates the divergent possibilities of art form.

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<sup>97</sup> Kalabhavan Mani was an actor, singer, musician, and lyricist. He is famous for many folksongs which contextualize Dalit life experience and worldview.

<sup>98</sup> Music is an integral part of Christian traditions of worship in Episcopal and non-Episcopal churches and singing is part of the community worship.

Yesudas's devotion, especially to Hindu pilgrimage centres of south India such as Mookambika, Kollur, Sabarimala, and Guruvayur, ascertains his already established space within the dominant experience of music where the metaphors of music have been articulated through concepts of devotion, sanctity, chaste body, and spiritual life (Pampirikkunnu 2013: 46). Ramesh Gopalakrishnan remarks that having sung many devotional songs on Guruvayurappan and Sabarimala Ayyappan,<sup>99</sup> Yesudas could also seize a religious public sharing the religious experience associated with their tradition (Gopalakrishnan 2012: 39-40). It would not be an overstatement if we presume that when Yesudas displays his devotion towards Hindu gods and divine tradition of Carnatic music, he, in fact, tries to do away with his religious/caste identity that forbids a Latin Christian to pursue Carnatic music. From the historiographical analysis of popular music through Yesudas, it can be observed that the common sense within the domain of popular music caters to the demands of a hegemonic cultural public sphere. And Yesudas carries over this task through his allegiance toward Carnatic music, Hindu religious and ritualistic practices, and to the idea of a particular apolitical citizenship. The apolitical subjectivity is manifested in Yesudas as what can be termed a secular-*bhakti*. It is in his transition from *painkili* to secular-*bhakti* that Yesudas becomes the celestial figure of *Gandharva*.

It has been observed: "Devotion is unconditional servility. It is not different from the servitude bonded labourer has to the landlord, landlord to the local chief, and local chief to the king. Eulogy of king is akin to eulogy of deity; implicitly *bhakti* in the form of servitude or servitude in the guise of *bhakti*" (Varier and Gurukkal 2012: 239).

Yesudas's religiosity which he calls secular appears as an expression of servitude towards the hegemonic public sphere which produces conditions for being so. That is, Yesudas's

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<sup>99</sup> The deities of two famous Hindu pilgrimage centres in contemporary Kerala, Guruvayur and Sabarimala respectively.

secular-*bhakti* is an apology for being a Christian and for being a minority. By implication, the singer becomes a legitimate minority subject only by reproducing the discourses that structure him. In that sense, the apology is for being himself in the same way the Muslim singer Abdullah represents an erasure in the film *His Highness Abdullah*.

In Yesudas, hence, this secular-*bhakti* is a mode of self-articulation imperative to the singer's public self and the politics of visibility in music. Interesting is the different ways in which Yesudas appear as the symbol of the statist discourses of art and artistry. The different recognitions he had been awarded illustrate this statement.<sup>100</sup> A typical example would be the recognition Yesudas received from the state government of Kerala in 1992 where he had been conferred the title *Asthanagayakan*. The expression *Asthanagayakan* comes from feudal registers of the region which refers to a "court singer" or the "official singer of the state." Here, unified Kerala is imagined to be a princely state and the singer under royal patronage. Metaphorically, a feudal order is brought into the ambit of modern state tacitly evoking a feudal nostalgia. Arguably, what Yesudas represents is not only the symbolic world of the hegemonic Hindu subject in the realm of popular music but the process that invents and authorizes a hegemonic subjectivity through the idioms of state monopoly and tradition. Notions of sacred in feudal and modern regimes of power are functional here. Apparently, the secular modern state carries structures and imaginations of theocratic feudal order similar to the case of Travancore nostalgia. This feudal nostalgia recuperates ideas of sacred in secular democracy by repeatedly attesting the political theorist Carl Schmitt's postulate that "[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts. . ." (2005: 36). Agamben argues that contemporary democracies are "societies

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<sup>100</sup> Yesudas' titles and recognitions include *Asthana Gayakan*, *Asthana Vidwan*, *Sangeetha Sagaram*, *Sangeetha Chakravarthy*, *Sangeetha Raja*, *Sangeetha Ratna*, *Bhakti Sangita Geetha Sironmani* etc. Refer [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_titles,\\_honours\\_and\\_major\\_awards\\_received\\_by\\_Yesudas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_titles,_honours_and_major_awards_received_by_Yesudas).

of spectacle” and the “glorious” aspect of power seems predominant in governance. That is the reason why “the media are so important in modern democracies . . . not only because they enable the control and government of public opinion, but also and above all because they manage and dispense Glory. . .” (Agamben 2011: xii). Dispensation of glory thus seems imperative in interpellating the citizen. In view of the linguistic and cultural genealogies of the expression, it can be said that, presenting the title *Asthanagayakan* appear as a eulogy for feudal glory as well as a mode of recognizing citizen in a post-feudal state that is incapable to do away nostalgias of feudal patronage.

Here, the artist’s identity represents a paradox within the ambit of popular. This paradox cannot be overlooked. It is the Hindu secular discourses in India that translates paradox as benevolence of the minority subject. The singer’s travel from *painkili* to secular-*bhakti* mystifying both sacred and secular ideals destabilizes his being as it is fundamentally caught up in binaries inside spectacles of political imaginaries. The spectatorial aspect of the expressions of the self is foundational in the process. The idea of citizenship is the basis of nationalist imaginaries. In this context, the idea of citizenship is enmeshed in cultural imaginations of patriarchal ideology and Yesudas’s public performances emphasize this aspect of conceiving and articulating citizenship. The four-line *sloka* that Yesudas recites in every possible public appearance, written by the social reformer Narayanaguru, which invokes an egalitarian society sans caste and religious prejudices and hatred, has been cited by many to point to his secular beliefs. The editorial of *Bhashaposhini*, one of the major literary magazines in Malayalam owned by Christian entrepreneurs praises Yesudas as “someone who stood for Narayanaguru’s motto throughout, by voicing for a casteless society through the refined language of Malayalam” (*Bhashaposhini* 2010: 4).



Another example emphasizes this claim: Sabarimala, one the most popular Hindu pilgrim centres in Kerala, endorse Yesudas's version of *Harivarasnam*, the *bhakti keerthana* in praise of the Lord Ayyappan, to be the official version used. This seasonal pilgrim centre is famous for its repute as the most popular "secular" pilgrim centre, perhaps one of the largest of its kind even in a global context. It has to be noted that Sabarimala is an "all-male" pilgrimage that has anathematized feminine experience from all platforms of religious experience and ritual.<sup>101</sup> When secular Yesudas sings for Ayyappan, the masculine god, it legitimates his minority self inside the patriarchal modern state that produces this specific secular subject. That is, secularism seems to have sacred manifestations and it can produce sacrality of a different order. For the same reason, when the state recognizes Yesudas with the honour of *Asthanagayakan*, it merely becomes a poetic justice to the community history of modern Kerala.

Yesudas's identity as the signifier of dominant secularism discourses legitimates his Christian self and symptomatically this re-formed self becomes an agent of the dominant secularism discourses. Needless to say, the Latin Christian Yesudas's legitimacy as a classical singer is firmly grounded on his secular (Hindu) credentials visible in his public life. In another sense, the visit to Sabarimala masculinizes the otherwise subjugated Christian self into the national male and makes his subaltern Christian identity on par with hegemonic masculinity.<sup>102</sup> Here, the public religious performance of the singer recognizes itself with the dominant Hindu ideology wherein his Christian identity seems to be the nonmodern category that has to be practised in private and domestic spaces. Examples re-instating these arguments are many, ranging from his

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<sup>101</sup> Sabarimala is a largely male dominated pilgrim centre as women of menstruating age are not permitted to visit the temple.

<sup>102</sup> By analyzing the masculine imaginings involved in the ritualistic process of pilgrimage, Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella argues that the all-male pilgrim centre Sabarimala constructs male identities and the event of Sabarimala pilgrimage appears as an enactment of re-masculinization of the self. For a detailed discussion see Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella (2003).

devotion to Hindu gods to his habit of routinely singing Narayanaguru *sloka* calling upon for a secular society. Apparently, this mode of display of religiosity is identified with secularism and the man as the symbol of secularity in Kerala.

It is this spectacle of his public (Hindu) religiosity that Zachariah vehemently critiqued in the first article he wrote in 1992. In the widely talked about critique, Yesudas had been critiqued because of his visual presentations suggestive of secular ideals to be modelled on. The writer hardly mentions about Yesudas's religious identity except to make two points. In the first instance, author appreciates the singer's matchless success against all odds alluding to Yesudas's lower class, Latin Christian identity, which could have prevented him from pursuing a career in singing.<sup>103</sup> The critique unreservedly praises Yesudas's success and attributes it to his hard work, sincerity, and noble thoughts about music. But with the success in career, as the article goes on to claim, Yesudas gave up these supreme qualities and instead, a carefully constructed public image that put up with the experience of modernity has been cultivated and cemented through many ways of performing his art and identity. By implication, being secular is a performance and a spectacle. The cultural logic of Yesudas's secularism is also questioned here. According to it, mere scene shifting (of *kacheri*) from *kurishupallikkavala* to *ambalanada*,<sup>104</sup> devotion to all gods (suggesting his Christian, Hindu, and Muslim devotional songs), and the reception of his (Christian) voice in Hindu religious spaces does not form the discourse of secularism; rather, they are sheer charades in the guise of socio-cultural revolution (P. Zachariah 1992: 84).

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<sup>103</sup> Latin Christian Church in Kerala has a sizable population of lower caste and Dalit Christians in Kerala and therefore often subject to the caste-politics inside Christianity. And the community, while compared to other Syrian Christians denominations of Kerala lag behind in terms of social and economic indices.

<sup>104</sup> *Kurishupallikkavala* and *Ambalanada* imply premises of Christian Church and Hindu temple respectively.

Pertinent here is to note how the element of performance critiqued in Yesudas serves to reterritorialize his subjectivity. Here Paul Zachariah discards Yesudas's "performance" as pretentious and futile. However, when he published his apology in 2010, the author refrained from all his criticisms and crowned Yesudas as the apostle of secularism in Kerala. The whole article seems to be an allegory of political virtue and modern individualism personified in Yesudas, who is described as the only surviving symbol of renaissance Kerala (P. Zachariah 2010: 11). On the one hand, the author vehemently condemned singer's performances and in the next, the same mode of expressions of the self is decoded as emancipatory and modern. To put it otherwise, the author qualifies performance as innately part of Yesudas's artistic self, be it his public displays of devotion to Hindu gods or his devotional and popular songs. In fact, the performance author fails to see in singer's itinerary is his religiosity. On closer reading, both aspects of the singer can be explained as performance; the one that Zachariah critiques and the other "real" Yesudas, Zachariah later endorses.

When religiosity is taken as performance, it does not imply a dialectical continuity with Zachariah's earlier critique of Yesudas, but performance here is analyzed as a category to understand the subject. In this sense, performance is much deeper in its frame and equipped to destabilize canonical patterns of identifications. It has been already explained in the discussion of artists in Malayalam cinema, how the performer is at the same time the performer of music/art and the performer of dominant ideology and thereby making a "sonic habitus"<sup>105</sup> of taste and legitimacy.

Visuality offers a paradigm where dominant religion can presume to be the performer and the others become spectators of the public visual experiences of that. In

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<sup>105</sup> I borrow the term "sonic habitus" from Ori Schwarz (2015).

that sense, the performer always holds a dictatorial power. Here, it has to be noted that the spectator, performer, and performativity become one in the Latin Christian Yesudas. It renders both the performer and the spectator subject elusive, caught up in the nexus of representation. It is subjected to the visual regime of the dominant. In one sense, the birth of minority subjectivity premised on visual experience can be conceived as the manifestation of public uses of religion.

Hindu secularism, as has been manifest in the singer cannot be considered as contamination of his “pure self” either. It is an abstraction of the Christian subjectivity that forms inside the power nexus of majority-minority politics. This leads to the argument that the “real” Yesudas is a demand and an aspiration of the nation. This citizen subject is the signifier of lack, survival, and becoming inside the banalities of identity constructs. Yesudas apparently becomes the “real” of the representations validated and sanctioned within this frame. The cameo roles he had in popular movies instantiate this observation in a nuanced manner. There are a handful of films where we see the singer as part of the narrative performing his real self in the celluloid. In contrast to the Christian/Muslim artist in cinema, when the singer himself appears in cameo roles, he seems separated from the narrative space sitting aside and singing or on the stage where other characters are his spectators within. This singer draws a fan following within cinema akin to a masculine hero’s fan following outside cinema. This plane of performance of both his masculinity and his art function as parameters that legitimize his social identity when his religious identity is anything other than Hindu.

There are instances where musicians themselves (exclusively male, female appearances are almost non-existent in this case) appear in song sequences that clearly indicate the travel of music from its closed site of industrial production to the open space

of visual/textual rendering which has layers of meaning embedded to it. Here, he presents himself in the sacred language of music. Further, the domestic space is completely removed in these scenes, where the singer attracts a mob of a mixed nature. Examples are the scenes in which Yesudas performed himself in films like *Achani* (Dir. A. Vincent, 1973), *Nandanam* (Dir. Ranjith, 2002), and *Boy Friend* (Dir. Vinayan, 2005). In *Nandanam*, he sings a song supposedly in the premises of Guruvayur Temple, a place where Yesudas has been denied access to, despite being a staunch devotee of the deity Guruvayurappan. The singer's entry to Guruvayur is thus symbolically sanctioned inside cinema, which is indicative of the social respectability accorded to Carnatic music and the agentive potential it can impart to the non-Hindu singer. In the film *Boy Friend*, Yesudas appears as singing a festive wedding Song, which resembles the Mappila song at a Muslim wedding. There are scenes where he embraces a Christian priest and a Muslim man in his left and right, all of them dancing together in harmony with the song. Thus, he exhibits his second and equally important duty of becoming the catalyst of secularism by being the mediator and model simultaneously among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu selves. Yesudas's public religious life of a staunch Hindu apparently complicates the concepts of religious identity and secularity in a secular democracy. It is adequately conveyed through the visual presentation of his secularism as exemplified in the song. This song sequence is followed by a dispute among some of the guests at the wedding on some political comment. And there too, the mob turns to the singer where he gives a speech on the degradation of contemporary political culture, about the responsibility of the political representatives etc., thus fulfilling his moral responsibility as well. Hence, Yesudas becomes the ideal and legitimate subject of the nation, underlining the ideological determinism of secular democracy in India that spills over to cultural public

spheres in newer forms. Here tolerance and being secular become the sacrificial self of minority subject.

The only way the subject can manipulate the lack is by performing the sacrificial self. Until the subject makes sacrifice it constantly lacks legitimacy. The concept of sacrifice has been explained at length from philosophical and anthropological perspectives. It has been explained as the willingness to be killed or mutilated to appease god or for country, for the fellow people (Bubbio 2014: 1). This is where the mutilated subjectivities perform their positionalities in order to be a part of the endless fluctuations of identity. Nietzsche, whose analysis of self becomes an influence in Butler's postulate of performative identities, makes vital observations on how values and attitudes linked with sensorial faculties are inherently connected with social and historical conditioning of the individual. In his analogy:

[T]he will to power is the basis of all our valuations: we regard something as good when it is able to be put to the service of our dominant instincts, and we regard something as bad if it cannot. Under these conditions, slaves' values are determined by those urges that enable their survival, and thus, are suited to slavery. The slave comes to judge certain aspects of slave life to be good, for example, humility, poverty, and self-sacrifice, while judging their opposites to be bad, namely, all that is bold and creative and "living" in life. (Atkins 2005: 73)

When applied to the visual experience of music, performance holds space in the discourse of minority subjectivity as a political act of articulating self. The performance, by implication, metamorphoses the subject to a sacrificial self who sacrifices his identity of a Latin Christian to become a "secular Christian." It turns out to be the condition within which the Christian artist can legitimately own his self. As Kant posits, "when what we

do is to sacrifice, we create value for ourselves” (Bubbio 2014: 19). That is, the dominant discourse of secularism and the secular subject precipitates embodiments of a sacrificial self which render the minor inadequate in its present form.

When the political ideal of secularism becomes a sacred belief premised on ideas of unconditional loyalty, it may become codified in the language of performance similar to that of religious beliefs. Latin Christian singer who locates himself in the Carnatic tradition and his secular-*bhakti* becomes part of sacrificial subjectivities in this sphere. Unlike Syrian masculine figures, who find marriage with Hindu tradition an easy substitute for their religious otherness, marginal communities inside Church have to engage with questions pertaining to religiosity and subjectivity inside hegemonic systems of Church as well as the state. In short, the singer’s performance can be read as an absolute performance of sacrifice. It is through this act of sacrifice that the singer engages with his caste, community, and religious identities.

Moreover, the idea of sacrifice is endemic to Christian eschatology and historiography. Sacrifice is one of the foundational principles of Christian religiosity. The willingness to sacrifice is considered as the supreme quality in a believer. In that sense, within the idioms of Christian religiosity, sacrifice superimposes “material” anxieties with “divine” enquiry. Yesudas’s performance, therefore, transforms self-referential subjective religious experience into political citizenship of modern nation-state. That is the same reason why it would become an understatement to say the singer is merely imitating dominant ideas of identity articulations. In addition, the metamorphosis of the subject to citizen subject at display here finds anchorage in the religious traditions the subject comes from and to the political ideals of the time. Yesudas is performing his sacrificial self in multiple spaces and it is where the singer finds parallels in Christian

heroes of Malayalam movies with a Christian protagonist and artist-self in representative space of cinema. The singer, in that sense, articulates his self within the contingencies of his multiple allegiances. Here, tolerance and sacrifice complement each other disempowering other modes of identity articulations of self.

Cases of Kalamandalam Hyderali and Neyyattinkara Vasudevan<sup>106</sup> are examples of the implications of this notion of sacred and secular-*bhakti* Yesudas articulates in the public sphere. Apparently, they did not “perform” a minority or marginal identity to surmount the lack their religious/caste identities are marked with. One should also read the fate of Dalit Christian woman Rosie, the first woman to act in Malayalam cinema. The traces of her life in and outside cinema have been washed away into oblivion simply because she enacted an upper caste woman onscreen. She failed to “perform” caste and therefore was unable to do away with her caste. Either Hyderali, Vasudevan, or Rosie were not sacrificial bodies. Image, identity, and the concept of sacred are at work here to facilitate mythified notions of secularity and modernity. As Charles Taylor explains “[t]he exclusion operates here, not first against certain people already defined as outsiders but against other ways of being. This formula forbids other ways of living modern citizenship; it castigates as unpatriotic any way of living that would not subordinate other facets of identity to citizenship” (Taylor 2002a: 185).

### **The Stolen Gods**

When the singer is *Gandharva*, the subject enters yet another space contesting his corporeal existence and suggestive of desire. Yesudas – who is also associated with

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<sup>106</sup> Kalamandalam Hyderali (1946-2006) was one of the famous Kathakali singer and the first Muslim and non-Hindu performer in the field. Neyyattinkara Vasudevan (1940-2008) was a well known Carnatic Vocalist. Vasudevan pursued a career in Carnatic music when there was hardly any Dalit present in the field and he became the first non-Brahmin who sung at the renowned Navarathri Mandapam in Thiruvananthapuram.



romantic imaginations of an age for the many love songs he has sung in Malayalam films – at this point, becomes a *Gandharva* to become the metaphor of desire and by implication points to his transformation to an “other.” It has to be remembered that *Gandharva* in Indian cultures is evocative of anathematized desires and fantasies. He signifies the object of desire but always already unachievable given that he belongs to another space. The predicament of being at the same time the object of desire and being the one that prompts prohibition and exclusion translate the discourses on art and artist into the language of cultural politics in contemporary Kerala. This in-betweenness, the question of liminality within which the performative subject is entangled in, explains the impossible possibility that the minority self enunciates throughout.

Here, as an appendix to the analysis, it would be significant to take a specific example drawn from the history of religious-worship traditions now broadly come under the Hindu pantheon. Social stratification and family system in Kerala had been subjected to many changes toward the end of the nineteenth century catering to re-imagining of space in terms of the public-private dichotomy. For example, caste communities other than Brahmins did not have the habit of frequenting temples before this period. Nair families, who had been used to the worship of community-specific deities *Nagayakshi* and *Gandharva* outside home, started worshipping mainstream Hindu gods inside their houses. This transition, which also marked a transition from joint family to nuclear families, saw infrastructural changes in the private space where separate rooms for *puja* had been designed (T. V. Chandran 2012: 78). This transition, marked by the entry of canonical religiosity in the private sphere, also denotes the transition of understanding religious experiences as domesticated private affair. This space of religiosity conceived in the vocabularies of domesticity repeatedly associates the tradition and religiosity to familial, private space. That is the reason why when Yesudas seizes a temple going

public, he precisely addresses a particular public, religious ideology, and Brahminic value systems in newer forms. In other words, *Gandharva* is an outcaste god. He is the one who has been driven away by the social imaginaries of modernity in Kerala. He is an unreal symbol of potentiality that cannot be reached but has to be pursued endlessly from peripheries. *Gandharva*/Yesudas is there, but still not there. He belongs to the uncanny and he is the impossible artist where he embodies the “performative utterance” or the parole<sup>107</sup> of the popular.

Thus, this chapter analyzed the figure of the artist as a trope and method of the way a minority self is legitimized in the cultural imaginaries of contemporary Kerala. It tried to read the history of a visual repertoire vis-à-vis the embodiment of the artist-self in view of the caste politics of Christian representations. Yesudas, the artist signifies an unrepresentable god, an impossible artist, and thus the potentialities of liminality. That is, Yesudas does not simply author a particular taste and aesthetic value to music but “performs” it throughout; the signifiers of which are manifest in the post-1990s political milieu in India. Yesudas counters the community typecast and the hegemonic aesthetic paradigms of art but the counterclaims are equally problematic in the larger narrative of minority politics. This is because, in order to make a counterclaim Yesudas has to constantly translate himself into his hegemonic other self by Hinduizations which is, in other sense, Syrian Christianization itself. Precisely, the chapter explained a case in which the structuring of the Christian minority self elucidates the problems liberal secular imaginations of the minority subject and community.

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<sup>107</sup> Langue and Parole are two terms used by Ferdinand de Saussure whereas Langue is the system of language and Parole is the individual utterance or the manifestation of langue (J. E. Joseph 2017).

## Chapter Four

### **The Lost and the Liminal: Reading *Kadamattathu Kathanar* Chronicles in Contemporary Kerala**

This chapter examines the different renditions of the story of Kadamattathu Kathanar or Kadamattathachan (Priest of Kadamattom) <sup>108</sup> in diverse spheres of popular literary and visual narratives. The politics of translation of community history through the idioms of popular memory and imagination is the fundamental question this analysis tries to engage with. The journey from orality and collective memory to print public, and later to virtual landscapes illustrates the shifts and fissures inherent in these transformations. So, along with the thematic reading, this study also briefly attends to the political, historical, and formal preconditions of various texts.

The sudden inflow of Christian media religiosity in Kerala post-2000 along with the appearance of the religious popular in Malayalam television industry, which forged an extension of the earlier Hindu *bhakti* serials, gave a fresh impetus to the study of nuanced the meaning and politics embedded in the popular tale of Kathanar. Noticeably, only *Kadamattathu Kathanar* stories could maintain a consistent viewership in media that continue till date. Apparently, the popularity of the serial and its appeal to a wider audience owes to the elements of magic and spectacle in the execution of the story and the show seized a heterogeneous spectatorship. This analysis nevertheless considers reception as an event significant to examine aspects of its wider appeal, and the implications they have in the history of religiosity and traditions of faith in Christianity.

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<sup>108</sup> *Kathanar* is another word used to refer to a Syrian Christian priest. The word came from Syrian Malayalam or Garshuni Malayalam, which was the sacred language used by Syrians Christians until nineteenth century. Many terminologies are still in use in Syrian Christian liturgy and social life. *Achan* in Malayalam means father and is also the colloquial term used to address ordained Christian priest in general.

This is in view of the dialogue the story facilitates on Christian religiosity and community identity that interpret the legacies of affiliations and dissent in Christianities in Kerala.

It is in this context that, popular Christianity and its publics become worth examining so as to extend the argument in a different direction. Malayalam Cinema, even from the formative period has invested on mythology and popular beliefs, though this trend failed to form a genre of its own, unlike their sway in early Telugu and Tamil film industry. Likewise, Christian mythology had no genealogy to claim in Malayalam cinema industry, except for a few unsuccessful Bible-based movies.<sup>109</sup> But, in television, Christian folktales and mythology clearly made a space of their own. The chronicles the magician priest Kadamattathachan was the first and the most significant one that made waves in television primetime economy. Many private channels in Malayalam, following the huge commercial success of *Kadamattathu Kathanar*, came up with new tales of Christian mythology. Nevertheless, none of them could sustain viewers' interests for long.

There is a history to the sudden interest in Christian devotionals predominantly in the television. Though a comparison can be made with the earlier Hindu epic serials, the regional Malayalam serials which were produced exclusively for a Malayalam speaking community has a different social context altogether. These serials did not emerge from an empty space; however, they can neither be considered a regional counterpart or continuation of epic serials, which to a large extent paved way for the Hindu political mobilization in the 1990's as Arvind Rajagopal notes in his extensive study *Politics after Television*. A series of Hindu *bhakti* serials in television appeared following the huge success of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, along with various other serials and dubbed

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<sup>109</sup> Some of the films in this genre are *Jesus* (Dir. P. A. Thomas, 1973), *Snapakayohannan* (John the Baptist, Dir. P. Sethumadhavan, 1963), *Thomasleeha* (St. Thomas, Dir. P. A. Thomas, 1975).

versions available in Malayalam like *Jai Hanuman*, *Om Namashivaya* and the like.<sup>110</sup> It was only after the year 2000, following a phenomenal market success of private channels, that slots came to be reserved for the broadcast of religious serials of a more local and regional sensibility. It is in this space that the serial *Kadamattathu Kathanar* earned its popularity.

Hagiographies, largely part of Syrian Christian community narratives, made their entry into the arena of the popular through *bhakti* serials in the new marketplace opened up by private Malayalam channels. These narratives outwardly gave the impression that they are mere extensions of the earlier Hindu epic serials. But none of them were Biblical tales. On the other hand, there were short-lived televised narratives either on a recently canonized saint (eg: *Alphonsamma*<sup>111</sup>), or on religious cults like *Velankkanni Matha* (Mother Mary of Velankkanni Church). These serials, by and large, are marked by traditional Syrian Christian community setting right from dressing habits to mundane practices of churchgoing, chanting rosary, and evening family/community prayers in a conventional domestic space. This perception on the Christian lifeworld invariably presents Syrian Christianity as the only available model of belief system. They were not commercial successes and could not sustain the primetime viewership demands. And in the case of the priest, “the secular media” passionately embraced the magic of *Kathanar*.

This figure of the priest, in view of its return to the popular space and the premises that facilitated, is taken as a trope to discuss the genre of Christian popular which is

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<sup>110</sup> Seemingly, Doordarshan played an important role in imagining a Hindu nation and according to Ananda Mitra, India was redefined on Doordarshan with the help of specific signification strategies of television through the epic serials (1993: 153). The political climate of the nation which favoured a religious nationalism used these epic dramas as one of the primary sites through which one can successfully articulate the idea of a Hindu nation. “This helped in the formation of a new political conservatism that is the Hindu right” (Mitra 1993:154). For detailed discussions see Arvind Rajagopal (2008) and Ananda Mitra (1993).

<sup>111</sup> St. Alphonsa or Alphonsamma was a Catholic nun from Kottayam District Kerala and she is the first Indian woman to be canonized as saint by the Universal Catholic Church.

widely circulated across print, television, and cinematic publics. This priest is the recurring presence in Malayalam popular imagination, who appears as the witch-healer/priest, who comes to tame and cure the uncontrollable power and unidentified fears. The important point is that the image is as much a part of popular imagination as that of popular Christianity and consequently translated to imaginaries of Christianity. This chapter engages with the sphere of popular Christianity by juxtaposing it with the popular idea of Christianity. In other words, the way in which the popular engages with Christianity is the basis of this chapter.

The sweeping success of Kathanar stories signals the potential marketplace popular Christianity could seize, which in many respects complement the ideological subject of the secular cinema hall. The spectacles of faith the Kathanar stories present Christian religiosity in a particular way. This makes the narrative of the priest a preamble for examining “religious” in spectacles of the popular. Apparently, popular piety becomes the prominent image of Christian faith with the spectacle it put together intercepting miracle, myths, and popular beliefs to form narratives on church history. How the story engaged with the “secular community” distil into the politics of majoritarianism, caste identity, and community identity, making it an important text of the time. It is with this background that one must examine the various forms of Christianity in the sphere of popular imagination.

Representation and representability, Giorgio Agamben maintains, have “the potential to rupture the homogenous narratives of history . . .” (Murray 2010: 78). The various renditions of the mythical figure of KadMattathachan become points of reference that facilitate re-inscription of the categories associated with an arcane lore of a Christian priest. The primary difficulty in deciphering the symbolic meanings is to understand the

politics of time intrinsic to the retellings of the story. This is because the retellings try to conceive an idea of linear time in the way they articulate a particular sense of past and contemporaneity. This is pertinent to the understandings of community, religiosity, and Christianity in Kerala operational in a single narrative. The story, written in an immensely vast canvas and the diversity of the medium into which the myth has been adapted, makes the attempt to read it in the backdrop of historiography of Christianity in Kerala relevant. Principally, for this reason, the study focuses on specific aspects of the story with references to its mediations and publics.

*Kadamattathu Kathanar* is a legendary figure, believed to have lived in ninth century Kerala. One of the earliest references about the priests of Kadamattom can be found in *Niranam Grandhavari*<sup>112</sup> (M. K. Thomas 2000: 125; Manalil 2002: 222). The text mentions magic and sorcery practised by priests of the church Kadamattom – the forerunner being the priest named Paulose, who learned magic from a foreign bishop visited the place. Kadamattathu Kathanar is an archetypal figure of a Christian priest in Malayalam popular imagination. Kathanar has been a recurrent presence in the popular spaces in Malayalam cinema, theatre, television, and literature. These interpretations are predominantly based on Kottarathil Shankunni's renowned work *Aithihamala*.<sup>113</sup> The innumerable chronicles in print and visual productions about the priest's origin, life, and death more or less follow the description of Shankunni.

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<sup>112</sup> *Niranam Grandhavari*, believed to have been written around 1781, has references to *Kadamattathu achanmar* (the priests of Kadamattom). There are numerous versions of the story of the archetypal magician priest. For instance, *Niranam Grandhavari* claims that Kadamattom is synonymous with a tradition of magic and the priest Kadamattom is the representative of that tradition. Precisely, Kadamattathu Kathanar embodies a Christian Priest with magical and supernatural powers who can perform miracles. Hence, Kathanar find space in Christian mythology as well as oral histories of the region.

<sup>113</sup> Kottarathil Shankunni (1855-1937), born in Kottayam in the princely state of Travancore, which is now part of unified Kerala, was a writer and Sanskrit-Malayalam scholar. He was a prolific writer and started publishing various anecdotes and tales in the famous literary Magazine *Bhashaposhini*, published by Bhashaposhinisabha which ran successfully for decades (1892-1942), which was later revived by *Malayala Manorama* Printing and Publishing House in 1977. *Aithihamala* was first published in 1909, with successful reprints from different publishing houses.

Before going to the textual details of the story, it is important to trace the historical and cultural milieu that produced *Aithihyamala*. Evidently, the idea of the public underwent profound transformations with the evolution of print. And Shankunni's *Aithihyamala*, first published in 1909, from the established publishing house of Malayala Manorama, earned an immediate recognition and respectability, as it could claim a legitimacy in the evolving literary public of the time. *Aithihyamala* owed its success partly to the manner in which it could effectively engage with the tastes of this literary public that were predominantly upper caste. Most of the stories in *Aithihyamala* deal with anecdotes, myths, and folktales of feudal grandeur and glory through narratives on *Natturaajyangal* (princely states), kingship, and their rulers. They largely deal with lores on ancient heroes, warriors, family legends, magicians, sorcerers, medicine men, ancient temples, mythologies, and local deities that basically constituted the feudal repertoire and history. After the successful publication of several volumes, *Aithihyamala* has recently been translated into English, thereby bearing testimony to the steady public it has maintained throughout the years.

A brief summary of the story, as we read right from *Aithihyamala* advances thus: Kathanar was a Christian priest who possessed demonic and magical powers and exerted control over supernatural spirits. Kathanar, alias Paulose, was an orphaned boy reared by an old Christian priest of Kadamattom church, a church in erstwhile Travancore region now located in the district of Ernakulam in Kerala. It is one of the ancient churches in India noted for its architectural grandeur and archaeological significance. *Aithihyamala* describes the young Paulose as an “exceptionally intelligent and pious boy blessed with virtuous character and noble conduct” (Shankunni 2008: 429). Thus his mentor priest foresees a successor in Paulose and ordains him. One day, he happens to be held captive by a group of tribal people alleging trespass into their territory in a forest on his way back



to church after a failed attempt to find a missing cow from the church's cowshed. In captivity, Paulose befriends the tribal headman, who, pleased with the "good-natured" Paulose offers him lessons in magic and sorcery which later would alter his priesthood in important terms. The people he meets there are described as "cave-dwelling cannibals" belonging to Malayaraya community.<sup>114</sup> As years pass, the community headman, impressed with his intelligence, piety, perseverance, and loyalty obliges to make an exemption to the community rules and allows the captive Paulose to return to his village on condition that he should not reveal the secrets and the dwelling place of this community of sorcerers. Returning to the village he reunites with his mentor and vicar of Kadamattom church, who on his deathbed proclaims deacon Paulose as his successor. Paulose, ordained as the vicar of the church eventually becomes well known for his extraordinary powers by virtue of which he became a revered by people of all caste and creed. He grew to become a magic healer of chronic illnesses and was powerful enough to exorcise *badha* (possession) and evil spirits. Eventually, his fame made him a prominent figure in the locale as a spiritual and social leader.

Following *Aithihyamala*, Kadamattathu Kathanar chronicles appeared on various media. They include two films produced after the title *Kadamattathachan* in 1966<sup>115</sup> and in 1984, television series which appeared in major Malayalam channels,<sup>116</sup> the popular fiction of the same title *Kadamattathu Kathanar* (Nedumkallel and Vazhappalli 2006), and *Chithra Katha* (graphic story) published as part of *Balarama Amar Chithra Katha* series by Malayala Manorama in 2004. All other versions that came after *Aithihyamala* more or less followed Shankunni's account of Kathanar. Kathanar, the apparent prototype

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<sup>114</sup> Malayarayans, possibly alludes to Mala Aryan community, one of the tribal communities of Kerala. They reside mainly in northern districts Idukki, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta.

<sup>115</sup> *Kadamattathachan*, (Dir. K. R. Nambiar and George Thariyan, 1966). The text is currently not available.

<sup>116</sup> *Kadamattathu Kathanar*. Part 1. *Asianet*. (2004-2005), *Kadamattathu Kathanar*. Part 2. *SuryaTV* (2008-2009), Recently *Asianet* has started to re-telecast older episodes of *Kathanar*.

of Christian exorcist possessing magical powers, has been commonplace in popular Christianity with an animate space of belief and worship pattern. The easy analytics of labelling popular piety as a nonmodern category would impair the study in more ways than one because of popular piety's tacit but animated presence within Christian faith traditions. For this reason alone, it can be concluded that Kathavar representations offer complex amalgamation of concepts of the popular within the domains of faith and cultural imagination as well.

Early references to Kadamattathu traditions of magic point to the currency the figure of Christian priest has in popular memory. As understood from the evolutionary history of the print public sphere, the marginalization of oral narratives with the advent of print is presumptive of monolithic ideas of nation, people, and citizenship. Oral narratives have always been constellations of myth and memory contingent upon the sense of past. It tends to be elusive and resists labels. Myth is associated with sacrality in certain religious traditions (Olson, 156). Roland Barthes translated myth as: "[A] system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form. Later, we shall have to assign to this form historical limits, conditions of use, and reintroduce society into it: we must nevertheless first describe it as a form" (Barthes 1991: 107). Thus, arguably, myth subverts the logocentric perceptions/interpretations of human experience of reality, and by doing so establishes a different order of rationality. This suspicion of a logocentric expression is succinctly expressed in Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman in the preface of their compilation of early south Indian verses. It reads: "The following poem should not be in these pages. They should be sung, heard, swapped, quoted, commented upon, and enfolded in stories – all in an oral spoken mode. . . . To reduce them to writing, in a collection contained between two covers, is to displace

them from their living, collective context into a strangely silent medium” (Rao and Shulman 1998: 9). This apologetic note is suggestive of the dilemma that the historian encounters while attempting to read and reproduce a text which has a history that is beyond the modern idea of time. This problem of time and narrativity intercepts and interferes the discourses produced by the text.

As previously noted, there are many translations that sustained Kathanar stories in popular culture, both in religious terminology and in representational space. *Aithihamala* was a breakthrough in print culture where we find a detailed description of the myth. It is in *Aithihamala* that Kathanar, for the first time, appears to be a full-length character in print which is also *Aithihamala*’s lone Christian character/tale. The next known popular renditions are two Malayalam movies, both of which failed to become commercial successes. The theatre productions of Kathanar plays appeared afterwards were quite popular across Kerala. The presence of the demon-healer/exorcist priest in Malayalam cinema has the prototype of Kathanar since its inception. In the following section, the analysis reads through the varied aspects of the Christian priest’s story to capture the ways in which it demystifies stories of the demonic and the mystical within the terrains of belief and religiosity.

Malayala Manorama publishing house came out with a graphic story of Kathanar in 2004, with a claim that “we have avoided many prevalent tales on the priest which do not have the basis of *Aithiham*<sup>117</sup> as they are mere imaginations of the writers. We rely exclusively on *Aithihamala* written by Kottarathil Shankunni” (*Balarama Amar Chitra Katha* 3). What is at stake here is the preoccupation with the notion of “real” and “authentic” which, in fact, is the question of epistemology and language. The

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<sup>117</sup> The Malayalam word *Aithiham* refers to myth, fable, legend, etc.

ambivalence of the represented in pursuit of imitating the real sustains power politics of language and representability. This preoccupation with the notion of the real, tend to be the trope as well as the fissure in the narratives on religion, community, and faith in the genealogies of Christianity in Kerala. Hayden White observes that, “the very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which ‘the true’ is identified with ‘the real’ only in so far as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity (White 1980: 10).” The engagement of narrative form with the ideas of nation and community has already been the theme of various discourses to illuminate the ways in which the subject of the narrative as well as nation has been imagined in the process.<sup>118</sup> Narrativity is conditioned to moralize reality, which, by implication, is to identify with the social system that engenders the moral codes (White 1980: 18). The narratives on myth and memory of an arcane lore therefore necessarily work inside the grains of power that is operational in narrative contingency. Hence, this narrative contingency and form have to be examined carefully to decipher the politics of time and the semantics of the popular.

It must be noted at the outset that Christian mythology has never been successful or an essential raw material in Malayalam cinema and it is only with *Kathanar*, the element of the spectacular in religious experience received attention and popular appeal. The text engages with the idea of modernity of Christianity in Kerala as well as on the perceptions of Christian religiosity within representational space. In the sphere of religion, the ideas of profane and magic seem to suggest divergent histories. But, in the domain of popular culture, the narrative of the priest represents the struggle between good and evil ultimately to cast out the uncontainable, anarchy, and disorder so as to attain order manifested through the desired narrative totality.

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<sup>118</sup> See Benedict Anderson (2006), Homi Bhabha (2000), and Timothy Brennan (1995).

The dilemmas in accommodating the aspirations of modernity in its temporal, spatial, and semantic preconditions, is inherent in the cultural analysis in the postcolony. The obscurity of the mythical story, therefore, is predicated on the contingencies of the idea of modernity. The preoccupation with modernity thus becomes a persuasion not to define modernity but to critically look at the frameworks and conditions emerging thereof. That is why the study of magic and witchcraft tends to be immediately located in the framework of modernity. While talking about the discourse of modernity and temporality, Prathama Banerjee comments about the influence of Hegel in “articulating temporality in terms of territoriality” which according to her serves as the foundational logic of colonial modernity (6). According to this dialectic of time and space, “[i]f both the modern man and his other had to inhabit the same space, then the latter must be seen as inhabiting another time” (Banerjee 2006: 6). She further explains:

Postcolonial studies have shown how different modernities have evolved in different parts of the world, so much so that the very idea of a pure and originary, western modernity has become rather difficult to sustain. Yet the shared label ‘modernity’ does imply a shared temporal principle and perhaps therefore a shared predicament – the principle that alterity, any alterity, can be translated into temporal alterity, into non-contemporaneity. Modernity thus seeks to sanitize otherness, now wished away to another time as if it were another land altogether. If time in modernity is reconstituted as chronology, as a potentially empty extension like space, a point which two different entities cannot occupy simultaneously, it is precisely to produce this effect. In this time, only one can exist in the present – the truly modern. Others, with other histories and other temporalities, can no longer by themselves appear on the stage of world history to

disrupt its script; being chronologically past, they have to be first *re-presented*.

(Banerjee 2006: 6; emphasis original)

Analysis of myth and its representability thus calls for careful analysis, primary for the dilemmas inherent in identifying time as a metaphor. The story of Kadamattathu Kathanar and its renditions in various forms of popular culture inevitably evokes questions of temporality and space.

As we see in the text, the subject and event of the text is magic and taming of the paranormal. That includes the man, his magic, and the one who is subjected to magic; the *yakshi* which embodies uncontrollable agent of power to be destroyed. Here, the chapter would focus on magic as a symbolic system and as a metaphor to explicate yet another dimension of Christian presence in cultural imagination and in doing so, this reads through alternative narratives on the idea of modernity and Christianity in Kerala. Undeniably, the narrative structure of Kathanar stories or tales of taming *yakshi* establishes an image of the prototypical Christian priest that perpetuates conceptualizations about modernity of religion and community predicated essentially on notions of caste. Apparently, magic seems to be the ground where the manoeuvrings and manipulations of identities are at work. This analysis would look at the categories of “modern” and “nonmodern” from the vantage point of the political contours which the practice of magic brings into the sphere of religion and caste as well. This is particularly important as magic, when located in the paradigm of modernity of Christianity, suggests an alternative system of belief contesting the autocratic theological authority of the church. When magic is taken as an empirical category associated with the experience of the marginalised, it implies subversive potentials and different forms of resistance. This implies that the tale can be read against the dominant narratives of religious modernity in

Kerala. This further leads to the narrative of violence inside the ideology of caste society. Here, the analysis will closely examine the trajectory of magic in terms of the narratives of defilement and purgation which is central in defining the performer and the subject alike.

### **Spectral Speeches and Liminal Worlds**

The term magic suggests necromancy, occultism, enchantment, witchcraft, etc., which connotes to notions of impossible, uncanny, supernatural, wonder, mesmeric, disbelief or the unexpected to mention a few. *Mantravadam*, *Mantrikavidya*, *Indrajalam* are some of the words that are used in Malayalam in this sense. Magic presupposes an audience – immediate, distant, physical, imaginary, or intuitive. The condition that necessitates the magical is the presence of an “other” different from the self. More than what it *is*, the important question would be what it *does* in making, abandoning, engaging with, and re-inscribing notions of the other which, in this context, implies community, caste, and subjectivity.

To explain further, it is important to note different ways of defining the idea of paranormal. Notions about the unexplainable often find expressions that signify a glitch in the universal order. That is to say that the world of magic and the experience of the supernatural attached to it mark a different order of life beyond the purview of the real. Magic does not submit to universal claims of the real and it even debunks the contingency that the real is subjected to. In what follows, this chapter tries to look at “real” as a trope and analytical category from the vantage point of the arbitrariness of it. This views the conditionalities where real become an objective category capable of undoing magic. In this analysis pertaining to Christianities in Kerala, this is the foundation of understanding ideas about the real and the world of fantasy, the sphere of institutional religiosity and

that of magic. This tries to relocate magic as the manifestation of subversive strategy/language, which also marks a vernacular space against the universal.

Subsequently, magic simultaneously becomes a language of both resistance and difference when the element of fantasy within questions the logic of systems of power. Slavoj Žižek observes that “[w]hilst functioning as a support of the totalitarian order, fantasy is at the same time that overspill or residue of the real that enables us to pull ourselves over, to preserve a kind of distance from the socio-symbolic order” (Wright and Wright 2000: 16). Taking a different example from another context, when talking about the Zande<sup>119</sup> belief system and practice of witchcraft in terms of conceptions of reality and objective truth, P. Winch opines: “What counts as real depends on the context and language used” and people from other communities would find it difficult to understand the distinction between the real and the unreal “without understanding the way this distinction operates in the language” (Lukes 1985: 105). In a nutshell, magic functions as a symbolic world to respond to the demands of the real. In the following section, magic is primarily posited as the other of real and in doing so, the section examines the way in which it intervenes in the order and rationality of the real.

The most popular chronicle about Kadamattathachan is his encounter with the monstrous *yakshi*, Kalliyankattu Neeli, the evil spirit the priest brings in control by his magical powers. Kalliyankaattu Neeli,<sup>120</sup> the supernatural spirit with phenomenal powers is believed to be the wandering soul of a lascivious woman, thirsty to avenge her death. This spirit of the woman “dressed like an attractive young whore” (Shankunni 2008: 436) is supposed to be a good woman turned bestial apparition. The spell of Kathanar increases

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<sup>119</sup>Zande is one of the African tribal communities known for their community practice of magic.

<sup>120</sup>Kalliyankaattu Neeli is the prototype of aberrant female spirit in the cultural imaginations in Malayalam throughout and this imagery of she-devil figures in folklore and fables popular in the region.



as he gains control of this fierce *yakshi* and emancipates the whole community from fear. The course of events shows that the important act in Kathanar stories is the performance of magic and the priest's encounters with evil in the material and spiritual domains. His encounters with evil spirits, most often those with the fierce and bloodthirsty vampire woman, are the recurring image throughout all productions; and freedom either from possession or from the possessed is mostly the objective of events.

Francesca Orsini argues that “[o]ral epics, to be found almost everywhere on the subcontinent, usually depict a patriarchal and essentially male world . . . and reveal a powerful sexual fear” (2007:11). The fear of virulent female body has been foundational in discourses of sexuality across cultures. The connection of ferocious monstrous figures of femininity and the phallic fears of patriarchal society has long been discussed in psychoanalytic theories. This image of belligerent femininity and its connection with the psycho-sexual anxieties of regimented systems, in fact, points towards the subversive potentials these female images possess. *Yakshi* imageries in the cultural psyche and their mediations to religious fields are emblematic of the regimented institutional religiosity in a patriarchal caste society. The uncontainable feminine power, often held as destructive, is a recurring presence in Malayalam literary scene specifically in oral traditions and mythologies. Aberrant sexualities are also associated with madness to produce stereotypes on the gendered body, subaltern self, and expressions of faith. The metaphor of she-devil laden with psycho-sexual overtones maintains a circular narrative to sustain feudal and patriarchal power structures.

In Malayalam, most *yakshi* myths have been stories of caste violence, bloodshed, and misogyny. Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's novel *Yakshi* is a modern allegory of the archetypal sexual fears of male dominant cultures. This fear of female sexuality has

specific caste, community undertones that make inroads into histories of caste violence and feudal pasts of Kerala. Thus the fear of an aberrant self visibly dominates these myths. Most often they are victims of sexual and caste violence. They represent women who have been penalized, killed, and mutilated on charges of adultery, or for violating caste taboos and thereby disrupting feudal hierarchy. She epitomizes an archetypal figure embodying unrequited love and desire. In the tales, by implication, the very concept of active femininity is symbolic of unrequited sexual desire and it further signifies the mandates under which female sexuality becomes redundant and non-existent. The taming of this female figure in popular cinema brings in priests, wizards, and modern therapeutic healers into its narrative.

The short stories of Dalit writer C. Ayyappan brilliantly challenge the feudal nostalgias of Malayalam literary scene using unconventional methods of narration where the *uncanny* is the norm and the normal. In doing so, the author engages with caste violence through his ghostly characters and with their unconventional setting. The narrator's careful distance from exigency of the easily accessible real/linear time and space is remarkable where he debunks and unmake the plain daytime realities. The experiences of the night and darkness, the stories claim, have to be weighed beyond the artistic beauty of the story. The narrative replaces real-time with the murky and mysterious experience of life in the dark, and this craft unmakes both narrative conventions and the very notion of contemporaneity itself. The female spirit, suggestive of unrequited desire and the bearer of wounds of misogyny and caste violence, appears as mother, lover, wife, sister, etc. They embody a community rather than individuals. The women in these stories are denied agency in human form but we hear them when they escape from the perishable body and its pains. Author retaliates to the phallic fears of patriarchal society by giving voice to the unrepresentable, not to simply voice against or

revolt against caste violence, but to narrate and historicize the hitherto unheard stories of subaltern communities. By doing so, the story impressively uncovers caste violence through destabilizing the myths about the sexual body and aberrant sexuality. The stories demystify the chronology and syntax of storytelling in equal measure. For the narrator, this method is not only a narrative technique but the only rational way of putting things in order in the lifeworld he has access to.

The conceptual use of the much popular narrative technique of magical realism finds a perfect craftsman in these stories. But the challenges the author puts forward to the intuitive faculties of the habituated reader of Malayalam literature is much deeper than that. The subaltern lifeworld enveloped in the garb of magical realism and laced with paranormal visual imageries destabilizes the very idea of reality itself. The author Ayyappan gives voice to the quietened females to explain their part of the story. Darkness and ghosts are the key characters in his stories and the moral universe of the story contradicts stereotypes and myths about black body and subaltern self. A life in daylight is unreal to the characters and their reality and truth claims lie outside the common sense of time and space. They, the victims of caste violence, transmute themselves to another cosmos of existence. Their desires, revenge, and protests take the shape of ghosts and nights itself. In a poignant note in the story "*Arundhathidarshananyaayam*," the narrator emphasizes that after all the ultimate truth lies in one's own whimsies (Ayyappan 2008: 17). The narrator thwarts the very idea of objective truth. For him, there is nothing more legitimate than one's consciousness.

Eventually, we find that mysteries and bloodsheds are legacies of the daylight as far as the Dalit life is concerned and only night and the world beyond can provide coherence, tranquillity, and continuity. The negation of order is what offers an order in

this cognition. Addressing it as strategies of resistance would be too simplistic a conclusion and at a deeper level, the experience of the subject, indicative of the torments it undergoes, untether resistance from the ontology of pain and humiliation. The paranormal is the paradigm that emancipates or sets free what is unspeakable in daylight. It mocks, critiques, evaluates, and challenges the real. It does not address the real simply by foiling it with fantasy. Instead, the narrative contrives another universe. Needless to say that from the very moment the world of magic and fantasy enter the symbolic system of language, it enters into an endless conflict with the real, the normal and the normative. Ghost monologues here appear to be the confessions of hegemonic society; confessions of aggressive oppressors.

Taking the case of Kathanar, he emerges as the potential arbitrator between the untamable spirit and the fearful society, and magic appears as a means through which the subject finds recognition against her humiliation and the subsequent expulsion from the community. Malayalam film *Adharvam* offers another example in this vein. The hero, born to a Namboodiri man and *Pulluva*<sup>121</sup> woman, becomes the destructive power in vengeance of the humiliation he faces from the Namboodiri community that opposed his affair with an upper caste woman. He masters the *Atharvaveda*<sup>122</sup> – the Veda that supposedly contains lessons on sorcery and witchcraft – by means of which he retaliates against his upper caste counterparts and enemies. Sorcery here stands for a way of life for embattled identities. In varying degrees, it metaphorically alludes to a suppressive past.

Thinking along this line, the priest is a subaltern self who belong to a different world beyond. The identity of the priest is mysterious and equally significant in the entire

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<sup>121</sup> Pulluvan community is one of the Dalit communities in Kerala.

<sup>122</sup> *Adharvaveda* is the fourth segment of Hindu scripture *Vedas* which is also described as the Veda of magic and witchcraft.

structure of the plot. Miracles and “divine interventions” use the body of the priest or a saint in many a movie to convey the unexpected, to be the *dues ex machina* in the plot.<sup>123</sup> In the process, the one who is subjected to and the one who performs magic share an equal level of objectification and alienation. To elucidate this point, it is necessary to examine both characters in light of the conceptual terrains they represent.

The legitimate body of the priest functions as the medium of transformation from the profane to the sacred, where he saves both the vampire and the community. In monotheistic religions, ritual purity is predicated on the agency of a legitimate body which is free of impurities. In Christian theological and philosophical schools of thought, pain and punishment inflicted on the body seem to be inevitable in constructing a sacred body.<sup>124</sup> This aspect of physical purity and ascetic body (translated as spiritual authority) is axiomatic in the design of the priestly class in hegemonic and monotheistic religions. The notion of physical purity is foundational in caste discrimination. It is explained in the theoretical frameworks of Dalit theology that perceptions of purity and pollution correspond to the epistemic sphere where the oppressor and the subject are constructed (Rajkumar 2010: 130).

In a different sense, the narrative of the priest and taming of the *yakshi* emulate Biblical parable of prophets. The chosen one (orphan boy Paulose) is made to be the leader through divine intervention who is then entrusted to redeem the flock from the evil spell (*yakshi*). He starts off his holy mission of nailing the *yakshi* and eventually returns to where he belongs. That is, the healer is equally important as the healing or the taming of deviance/madness. In his argument about authority, Weber uses terms like

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<sup>123</sup> The film *Amen* (Dir. Lijo Jose pelissery, 2013) uses this technique.

<sup>124</sup> Twentieth century mystic and philosopher Simon Weil and the twelfth century Catholic preacher Saint Francis advocated this idea of self-inflicted physical pain.

“charismatic domination”, “mission”, “calling,” and “extraordinary situation” while talking about Charismatic leadership (Cavalli 2006). The “extraordinary situation” or “mission” becomes the context in which the chosen man is identified by himself as well as by his fellowmen as the leader, thereby getting elevated to a position of superhuman power. However, one has to reach this position only by virtue of some specific qualities innate to him (Cavalli 2006: 318). This situation is conceived as extraordinary by the people involved in it (Cavalli 2006: 322). In the words of Talcott Parsons:

[A]n extraordinary situation implies the pre-existence of an ordinary situation with an important group dimension. Ordinary may mean only: in accord with culturally established expectations of the people involved. On the contrary, extraordinary must mean, primarily, that such an agreement failed because of endogenous or exogenous factors, or a continuation of both. But it must also mean that the people involved are not able to re-establish a balance between the situation and expectations by the use of available cultural means. (qtd. in Cavalli 2006: 322)

In *yakshi* myth, the extraordinary situation is the menace of the vampire woman which demands an immediate action. The qualifications he acquires are well explained in the stories and specifically in terms of his celibate masculinity. It has to be noted that Kathanar is allegedly part of Jacobite-Orthodox Syrian Church of oriental lineage and priestly celibacy has never been customary in oriental churches.

In the 1984 film version, the feminine, less masculine figure of Prem Nazir who enacted Kathanar, gave the story a gendered perspective by introducing three different women characters in Paulose's life. He is an ascetic by choice and the women characters complement the political significance of family specific to popular cinema and television

space in India (Mankekar 1999). By doing so, the narratives re-produce docile bodies through gendered and casteist stereotypes. The women symbolically represent the different phases in Paulose's journey to become a revered spiritual leader. In a way they symbolize the temptations he resists which bears testimony to his legitimacy to stand for his faith. It is in the cinematic narrative that his sexuality becomes a decisive element and the precariousness of his body, primal.

When purity is tethered to a celibate body, sacredness and notions of physical purity become inseparable. This religious paradigm, when taken into the idioms of popular cinema, works in tandem with its intrinsic heteronormative family space specific to experiences of modernity. When the Christian heroes in the modern sagas of Malayalam cinema prefer to be secular by choosing to marry caste Hindu girls, the premodern/ nonmodern Christian priest opts to be celibate. His masculinity is predicated on the ideal of an ascetic, selfless man. This is instrumental in transforming the itinerary of Kathanar narrative (from oral story to print and visual format) to an itinerary of nation-state and modernity of Christianity. It is nothing but the selfless posture of a celibate man, a *brahmachari* that makes him the well-established leader of the community who even arranges the marriage of his Muslim friend's daughter (*Kadamattathachan* 1984).

The political implications of ascetic masculine ideal have been discussed in various contexts in the history of India and the greatest proponent of ascetic ideal in modern India would be M. K. Gandhi. The image of the priest and the parallels it has with the ascetic ideal of masculinity is pertinent. This ascetic ideal resonates religious theodicy as well as modern political thought predicated on ascetic masculinity popularized by Gandhi. Here, *brahmacharya* stands for a political ideal that can make mediations to religious community as well as a larger national community. This apparently

complements celibate masculinity's legitimization in dominant forms of Hindu and Christian religious practices in India. How such imaginations of masculinity inform contemporary political imaginations of Hindu right can be a project in itself and therefore beyond the scope of the discussion here.

The priest here is one who observes sexual abstinence and retains vestiges of his forest life. In the 1984 cinema, Paulose who later becomes Kathanar is portrayed as an orphaned man who chooses the path of sexual abstinence as he could not marry the woman he was in love with since her family refused his marriage proposal raising questions about his unknown past and ancestry. This becomes a defining moment for Paulose who eventually decides to become a celibate priest. The priest then commits himself to the wellbeing of society in accordance with the religious vows he had undertaken. Seemingly, it is magic that earns him new respectability. When describing various contexts of love in popular movies in Indian languages mainly Hindi, Orsini notes that; "love was combined with the discourse of celibacy (*brahmacharya*), which enlisted the old ascetic ideal to serve a host of new reformist and nationalist goals. For, nationalist-minded couples, the sweet taste of renunciation, *tyag*, came to seal romantic love and distinguished 'true love' from lustful attachment" (2007: 34). The priest in the story echoes a similar commitment to the society/nation he lives in.

To elucidate on the discourse of ascetic ideal, another aspect of masculine assertion would be pertinent here. Filippo and Caroline Osella, in their study of masculine assertions in the culture of the Sabarimala pilgrimage, argues that the householder and renouncer are not conflicting agents but are complementary to each other (Osella and Osella 2011). This complementarity functions when both these agents feed into the construction of the same ideology; be it the nationalist imaginary or the religious ideal.



Thinking along this line, ascetic masculinity represented by the priest and heteronormative male of the cinema appears to be versions of the same masculine ideal. Thus, it can be argued that this image of masculine ascetic is encoded in the semiotics of hegemonic masculinity of Malayalam cinema. The choices of sexual abstinence, elimination of desire, and realization of the inner self authenticate him as the national masculine figure devoted to the wellbeing of the society and the homeland.

This identification of ascetic male body with the idea of patriotism manoeuvres an essentially modern national masculine figure premised on feudal patriarchy and Brahminic notions of purity and legitimation. The publication of Kathanar stories in *Amar Chitra Katha* form has to be studied in this light. *Amar Chitra Katha* has been observed to have made significant interventions in the making of an Indian middle class through categorical use of hegemonic, normative masculinities (D. Sreenivas 2010). The resonance that this literary form has in the ideological structuring of middle-class India places it in a historical continuity with the popular Hindu narratives that appeared in *Amar Chitra Katha*. In that sense, the graphic retelling of the priest's tale abstractly laces the subjugated elements with a dominant collective memory. At this point, hence, the stories qualify themselves to be read against ways of identifying the sacred with that of the region/nation.

The trials that the masculine self undergoes, in which the priest emerges victorious, are evidently ordeals of his celibate status and "spiritual power" and exemplify the language of the sacred through the celibate masculine body. That is, though the community of magic is an aberration from the establishment and from the modernity of religion itself, the priest's self-articulations clearly places him in the ambit of dominant religious field. It has been argued that social reform movements in south India have taken

from dominant paradigm to formulate revisionist religious ideologies from within. P. Sanal Mohan has noted how a re-interpreted Vedantic tradition found tenable in the reform project spearheaded by Sree Narayana Guru that helped him to “evolve a reformist monotheism to replace the worship of traditional ‘inferior’ gods” (Mohan 2006: 38). The replacement of “inferior” gods and “inferior” faith systems with dominant forms would further complicate the idea of faith and belief. The priest’s masculine identity, punctuated with hegemonic ideologies impedes the potential that magic proposes as a different practice of faith. Thus, arguably, the hegemonic masculinity interferes and complicates the narrative of community history imprinted in the story.

Apparently, language politics is one of the repressive strategies employed in the narrative that produce marginal identities. In the novel *Kadamattathu Kathanar*, along with the visible elements of paranoia towards differences encrypted in the female body, the role that language plays is crucial to categorical exclusions occurring in the process of normalizing caste. In other versions, the community of sorcerers, from whom deacon Paulose earns his magical powers, is named after the Malayarayas or are just nameless cave dwellers. But the novel, which belongs to the genre of *Janapriyasahityam* (popular literature), presents the legend in a completely different perspective by casting tribal people as a Tamil speaking community. The marginality of the community marked by the language Tamil can be read along the larger politics at work in the construction of the Malayali identity. An easily discernable paradigm is the way a unified Malayali identity has evolved in the formative period of Malayalam cinema. Tamil has always been a point of reference in establishing the superior position of Malayalam in terms of intellectual and cultural essence. The Tamil identity is marked with excesses best illustrated in Malayalam films and historically Tamil has always been “the other” punctuated by essentialist aphorisms in Malayalam cinema (Jenson 2013: 38-40; Manju 2013).

Tamil identity is also used to assert the casteist underpinnings of Malayalam cinema of which the film *Manichithrathazhu* (Dir. Faasil, 1993) presents an interesting example. In the film, the psychological fantasies of the central character Ganga is identified as the *badha* (possession) of a Tamil dancer of an erstwhile era. Jenny Rowena, in her reading of woman spaces of Malayalam cinema, distinctly critiques this “insanity” as a narrational strategy peculiar to mainstream Malayalam cinema’s casteist underpinnings. According to her, Malayalam cinema seems reluctant to accommodate infidelity in the characterization of its moral women who are habitually and strictly Brahminical in conduct (Rowena 2009: 24). This impasse in narrational strategies constructs the Dravidian-Tamil Nagavally as the “other” in contrast to the upper caste Malayali woman. Through the attribution of a sexual body and desire to the Tamil dancer Nagavally, the film purifies the Nair woman by emptying out elements of desire and expression of it, be it dance or madness. This process of curbing and taming the “abnormal” is amply substantiated by projecting the resistant subjectivities as subjugated and essentially dehumanized bodies. Thinking along this vein, it is undoubtedly evident that the priest represents feudal patriarchy in all respects, underlining his alleged Syrian Christian lineage and manifestly repeating the caste violence over subjugated bodies. Saying this would make the simple conclusion that Kathanar is nothing but a garb of the dominant ideology. The profound implications encoded in the story are much deeper than that, and the loud claims of social service of this selfless ascetic, seemingly, plaster the trials which the priest encounters.

Going back to *Aithihamala*; in *Aithihamala* the only accepted knowledge and knowing-self is elite Hindu while all other identities including the Christian priest and Malayaraya community rank equally subservient in their lack of wisdom and *Culture*. In that sense, Kadamattathachan, the vampire woman Neeli, the Tamil speaking cave

dwellers, and the cannibal community are demarcated from the sanctified sphere of feudal hegemony in all aspects of social life including religiosity and community. Suggestively, *Aithihamala* echoes the common sense about Christians in Kerala where the latter stands for a different way of life and belief system, thereby signifying their relatively low status among the Hindu elite of the region.

*Aithihamala* narrative ostensibly underscores the formidable power of the priest as he is described as the only person who could end the menace of the monstrous *yakshi* when many prominent magicians had failed to nail her. In the television series, Kaattumadam, the famous Brahmin magician who is equally powerful as the priest is reluctant to exorcize the spirit as he was frightened by her wrath and the ensuing curse on his progeny. Corrine G. Dempsey in his account of the priest and his nailing of *yakshi* observes that Kathanar wins over not only the *yakshi* but also his adversary of another kind – the Brahmin magician (2005: 119). That is to say that the priest has never been treated as equal to his Brahmin counterpart nor has he gained any new respectability. Further, in *Aithihamala* the author Shankunni establishes the priest's inability to produce and comprehend knowledge as he does not have a proper language. This is evident from the instance where, towards the end of the segment "Kadamattahu Kathanar," the author mentions about the books on magic and sorcery written by the priest. According to that, although the author had taken pains to record Kathanar's knowledge of magic, all of them were written in a rather unintelligible, grubby language or *kshudrabhasha*.<sup>125</sup> This "unintelligibility" or "unavailability" of particular strands of knowledge is not unusual in the mainstream discourses and episteme. This absence is the absence of history itself. That means, though there are countless stories about the priest, his voice is lost forever as none of the books he made could be part of the knowledge system. This very

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<sup>125</sup> It can mean demonic or unintelligible language of witchcraft.

impossibility of continuity describes the nature of the “voices” that we hear through *Aithihyamala* envisaging and conceptualizing a region and its religion. Pertinent questions here are language politics and the language of power politics entangled in this narrative of oblivion and loss. The feminist/Dalit polemic about subversive language and the way it challenges the language of hegemony have to be remembered in this context. Here, the “unintelligibility” of language itself becomes symptomatic of its fundamental incongruity with Sanskritic traditions because what is “unintelligible” for Shankunni who represents a Sanskritic tradition, is intelligible for the subaltern community in the narrative.

Language gives agency to the subject and it facilitates expression of the self. Ironically the agency imparted to the priest had been taken away as the story comes to an end so as not to hinder the poetics of *Aithihyamala* which is a repertoire of feudal memory. It goes without saying that though the stories are known as folk stories, the term “folk traditions” cannot be considered in the present sense of the expression because of its anchorage on the feudal universe. Most significantly, Shankunni evidently differentiates “traditional” – to denote elite Hindu/feudal life world and “primitive” – to denote tribal and other communities like Christian. Curiously, Christian community narratives that refer to Kadamattom tradition do not have reference to tribal life world as magical community performing sorcery and witchcraft. As it is evident here, the world of *Aithihyamala* seems to mirror colonial perceptions of eastern religious traditions as inferior pagan worship impinging upon the caste prejudices pertaining to purity and pollution.

The final resolution to the problems of both the society and *yakshi* comes in the form of the priest’s decision to station the *yakshi* and transform her into a revered deity in

the locality and thereby “place her indefinitely outside his own fold” (Dempsey 2005: 121). He further talks about how the *yakshi*-priest encounters can be considered “as an important means against which the self is defined and enhanced” (Dempsey 2005: 127). Dempsey alludes to the political meanings and social implications the idea and act of conversion would carry over and he further says that the taming or conversion of the she-spirit is an impossibility “because, the other, under close inspection, is really not” (2005: 127). An indirect but similar process can be found in Gananath Obeyesekere’s narrative of a certain Sinhalese demon story in which he describes how “the prey and predator is confused throughout”(cited in Dempsey 2005: 118).

To rephrase it, the priest is the intermediary between the hegemonic society and the unclean spirit. Studies on Syrian Christian maintain that “[s]yrian Christians had the power of neutralizing ‘pollution’, and were called upon to purify by touch, for the Brahmins and Nairs, such substances as had come into contact with lower castes” (S. Visvanathan 2010: 3). Nevertheless, there are historical writings that reject the hegemonic narrative behind the practice of “purify by touch” which tries to bolster the Syrian Christian claim that they are upper caste Namboodiri converts and therefore should be treated at par with dominant caste communities of the region. According to Kurien Thomas who tries to approach Syrian Christian or Nazrani history from different reference points, many Syrian Christians had been into mercantile vocations and their *Vaishya*<sup>126</sup> caste status conferred them with the power to symbolically “remake” the polluted objects by touch and render them useful again (K. Thomas 2000: 94-99).

The priest, here, touches the “untouchable” spirit of Neeli to sanctify her. The domestication of the vampire woman, the destruction, neutralization, and the further

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<sup>126</sup> In Hindu Varna system, Vaishya tribe is associated with trade and commerce who form the intermediary caste located between Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and the Shudras.

transformation of *the evil* or *the invisible* into *the divine* and *visible* through institutionalized worship seems to be the culmination of all versions of the story. The tale of the taming of the monstrous, feminine spirit reiterates the repressive caste system in more than one way. It is a circular journey where the Christian priest plays an integral part in reproducing the dominant discourses. The tamed *yakshi* can neither cease to exist nor is she perishable. She is simply metamorphosed into a divine, tangible, and inert deity. Henceforth she leaves her erratic flights and unquenchable desires. This may be interpreted as conversion from pollution to purity and from profane to sacred.

Ironically, while the people are given back their freedom by the taming the *yakshi*, *yakshi* is liberated, ironically through transforming herself to an immobile divine power stationed in a permanent space. The new avatar begins from this confinement of *yakshi*, that is, *prathishta* or *kudiyiruthal*.<sup>127</sup> Needless to say, many of these deities are later appropriated into the Hindu pantheon where they remain as subaltern deities or inferior gods. A pertinent example of the extensions of this continuous process of mystification and appropriation is the temple Panayannarkavu where, according to the myth, the consecrated *yakshi* was taken to. This is a famous place of worship in the Hindu pantheon in southern Kerala and the *yakshi* is just one of the minor goddesses, stationed in the peripheries – spatially and symbolically – of the Hindu deities at the temple. The transformation of *kavu* to temples and hierarchization of Hindu goddesses and local deities are emblematic of the caste politics embedded in it.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Consecration or installation of the deity in a Temple.

<sup>128</sup> *Yakshiyamma* according to the official explanation is nothing but a cautionary tale on the “dangers” of being lustful. It reads thus: “It is believed that she was a beautiful Virgin Goddess who became obsessed with nymphomania and was cursed to spend a life as a Vampire for her sins. One can draw a lesson of being cautious against excessive lust.” [http://panayannarkavu.org/pana\\_kavuYekshi.php](http://panayannarkavu.org/pana_kavuYekshi.php)

## **The “Real” and “Magical” Communities and Christianity**

This section tries to examine magic as a belief system and as a performative act by reading the representations of archetypal Christian priest alongside mythography and religiosity in Kerala Christianity. Observably, most of the Kathanar texts that have been discussed, give centrality to the masculine self than magic, which is to say that the performance is always superseded by the performer. This order of the narrative, obviously, does not emanate from economies of stardom, market value, and popularity when the actors are concerned. This is because neither Prem Nazir who played Kathanar in the cinema (1984) nor Prakash Paul who played it in TV series fit into the typical masculine image specific to the visual world of Malayalam cultural imaginary. This means the focus on the performer eludes the implications of magic. This negation of the act/performance is there right from the beginning where Kottarathil Shankunni denies any epistemic tradition to Kathanar’s magic.

The history of Christianity as such is a history of contests and conciliations of rituals and practices wherein magic holds an important space. In her magnum opus, Mary Douglas posits that the whole universe is regulated through certain divisions based on restrictions. So there are always certain things that are restricted and the ones that are not (2002: 9). The restrictions consequently determine formulations of sacred, profane, archaic, modern, and so on which often tend to create binaries. This postulation understands religion in all aspects of its evolution into a modern category of identification (Douglas 2002: 10-17). The restrictions invigorate conflicting territories within the discourse of religious history. Religion, when studied in terms of the restrictions it places, stands for its historical transformation. By implication, restrictions mark the historicity of the ritualistic practices and the legitimacy of the traditions they encapsulate. In the same



way, the modern conceptualization of magic and religion is predicated on different restrictions and their historical premises.

Magic, as a conceptual terminology tends to propose elusive – at times contradictory – positions. Magic has been explained in anthropological and sociological studies in terms of the community structure and its association with agrarian rituals, faith practices, ritualistic behaviours, and certain quotidian totemic practices. When located in the paradigm of religion, magic would be immediately categorized as the nonmodern or premodern “other” of religion. Early studies on magic and witchcraft categorized them as the quintessential nature of premodern communities reckoning them as “pre-religion” and “pre-science” (Mauss 2012: 15). Contemporary scholarship does not hold on to this claim and magic has to be examined in its embodiments and manifestations in view of the significations it can bring in. Thinking of magic as an alternative belief system with subversive potentials would be one way of looking at it. There are other positions which place magic as something that defines a religious community. For instance, in Emile Durkheim, central to “religion and social genesis and reproduction of the sacred” are religious practices or rites (Nielsen 2001: 121). For Durkheim:

The defining essentials of religion was not belief in spiritual or supernatural beings, but the distinction that all societies make between things sacred and things profane. The sacred is the realm of things personal and private, the daily minor needs of the individual. Religion is the system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, the vital issues of the community; it should be distinguished clearly from an enterprise like magic, whose main interest is the minor petty interests and ailments of individual. (Durkheim 2009: 100)

This renders magic trivial which is exterior to community while religion is what constitutes a community. According to social anthropologist Stanley J. Tambiah, magic is only an unsophisticated religion (1991). In James Frazer, the difference between magic and religion lie at the “distinction between direct control on the one hand and propitiation of superior powers on the other” (Malinovski 1948: 3). Kenneth Woodward in his account of miracles argues that: “In the Biblical perspective, magic is seen as the manipulation of nature – which is God’s creation – and therefore counterfeit, while a miracle is a sign of divine authority and power, and therefore legitimate” (2001: 25). Thus, arguably, the decline of magic and the rise of modern religion have bearings on the way faith communities are shaped into modern political categories.

It has been argued that the decline of magic from institutionalized Christianity actualizes “manageable forms of piety” (Randall 2004: 15). This transition is part of the Weberian disenchantment theory and the enlightenment modernity in the West. In Christianity the decline of the magical in terms of ritualistic practices and community affiliations are central to its organized and institutionalized religiosity since communities of magic are disperse and symbiotic in nature in comparison with the organized church. The idea of the rational subject and imagination of modern subjectivity is historically connected with this form of organized Christianity. Modernization of religion in many societies has been predicated on the destabilization of magic from the sphere of belief, towards a more rational idea of religion. Precisely, magic tends to be the nonmodern excess of modern religion.

However, remarks Randall, “while ‘freedom’ from magic is certainly invoked as a constitutive element of modern modes of subjectivity, this freedom is purchased only at the price of potent new forms of social control and regimentation” (Randall 2004: 13).

The difference established between a miracle and magic by Christian Churches exemplifies the symbolic energies of this regimentation where it tends to manipulate the experiential domain of religious ferment. On a closer analysis, magic and miracle share similar expression of the experience of transcendence. Elements of magic and exorcism have been part of Christology and restoration of the physical and spiritual health of human beings is a major concern in prophesies (Holodny 2011: 294). Miracle stories that have been taken as evidence of divinity seem to be explained in similar lines. What makes the difference here is the jurisdiction or lack of it to ascribe legitimacy for magic. In the Bible, there are examples that echo the question of legitimacy when Jesus performs certain magical/miraculous feats in front of his own people who charge him with blasphemy and name him the “king of demons” (NRSV *Bible*, Mark 3. 22). Canonisation, sanctioned by a supreme pastorate and based on empirical reasoning assumes legitimacy; while magic does not have a sacred rationale and the patronage of any kind of legitimate sovereign power. Arguably, “healing”<sup>129</sup> marks a rupture in the division of miracles and magic into profane or sacred. And the difference is more or less dogmatic and scriptural. This difference between miracle and magic apparently points towards the premises of the “modern” religion and its “nonmodern” excesses. Thus, by implication, modern religion is magic pre-empted with the enchantment and this reckoned miracle stories outside religion as sacrilegious. In short, magic, when considered as a system of belief signifies a religious community of a different order and therefore, suggestively, it unmakes the dominant idea of sacred as well as community. And, suggestively, the performative acts of magic unleash the taboos on bodily expressions which are outside the sphere of ritual purity of Syrian Christians. Hence the fear of the material and symbolic energies of magic

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<sup>129</sup> Healing is part of Christian theology and new religious/charismatic movements. Charismatic communities testify to witness/give healing from mental and physical ailments which seems to be one of the major elements of their popular appeal. The testimonials of miraculous cure are circulated widely but they do not form an institutionalized pattern or system to testify that. Moreover, these miracles do not evolve into allegorical stories and sacred histories and thus in one way denies the possibility of afterlives.

is the fear of the repressed, the enchantment. The expansion of new religious, charismatic movements in Kerala and the propensity towards alternative/charismatic religious movements within Episcopal/Syrian Christian Churches can be read as a move towards the enchantment of belief in the contemporary. This is also the heterogeneous space where popular piety takes over. It is also relevant to note that though Syrian Christians disown traditions of magic, magic and mythology conflate to legitimately become part of community narratives and historicization of Syrian Christian community in Kerala.<sup>130</sup> Together with this, one must also note that there was also a period when Kathanar stories had been at the centre stage in the professional theatre of Kerala, *Kalanilayam* before they were reprised in television screen. They were huge crowd pullers in Kerala which within and outside the Church. And it is in the modestly set *Kalanilayam* stages that Kathanar chronicles seized public attention from 1960s. But by 1990s Kathanar performances lost its sway in Christian Churches and some of the Churches banned such performances in church premises.

This leads to the proposition that, the sanitization of rituals and belief traditions in Syrian Christian churches had implicit caste politics. Regional caste specific rituals and practices among Syrian Christians showing allegiance to Hindu caste rituals have been customary; while aspects of subaltern belief systems have been labelled as abomination hindering Syrian Christian modernity. The priest does not figure in hagiographies, Church histories or any official historical documents apart from minor allusions to a Kadamattom

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<sup>130</sup> Church history of Kerala entwines mythology and legend to allegorize and sacralize community histories. For instance songs used in Christian art forms like *Margam Kali* – a traditional group dance practiced by Syrian Christians or Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala – extensively use the stories around the life and mission of Saint Thomas, the apostle. *Niranam Paattukal* and *Rambaan Paattukal*, a few popular verses based on Syrian Christians, also use elements of past to mystify the history. It is opined that these songs sung at auspicious rituals of wedding and the like pass on to generations the traditions of Saint Thomas Christians (Manalil 2002:15). Hagiographies, community histories, and family histories, which are integral to Syrian Christian historiography, illustrate this fact. They complement the making of sacred geographies (which forms the basis of pilgrimage) and sacred histories (which form the basis of divination/cannonization).

church its priests with certain magical practices, which clearly substantiate this politics of profanation. Still having an active community of followers who make offering to the priest, churches famous for Kadamattom tradition do not have even a single image or icon of the priest in Kadamattom. None of them owns the tradition of magic. This strategic expulsion of the popular from the religious/Christian pantheon has to be read alongside contemporary huge gatherings in churches in Kerala to celebrate the “secular” festival *Onam* in the most detailed manner. This is emblematic of the way in which Syrian Christianity imagine a modern religious community.

The following concluding section of the chapter attempts to read the retellings of Kathanar legend in terms of the region’s Christian traditions. For this, the chapter takes up two specific instances in the narrative; the former one is the recurrent image of absence/missing and the latter is the event of oath. And these two events, arguably, recapitulate the arguments about the historical transformation of Christianities into Christianity in Kerala. To explicate; throughout the different renditions of the priest, magic has been ascribed a premodern status by presenting it as innately connected with tribal life and practices of “primitive” religious system. Thus the tale is suggestive of its impossibility in modern space. This dissociates all aspects of magic from Christian belief and ritualistic practices. This transition in the popular space, though magical practices are still prevalent in popular Christian beliefs, is indicative of the caste politics in the imaginations modernity in Kerala. In the narrative, this idea of modernity is manoeuvred by essentializing tribal community and magic. This is further emphasized when *Aithiyamala* takes the authorial position from the priest by simply saying his language is unintelligible and lost beyond recovery. Suggestively, it is Kathanar’s lack of Sanskrit knowledge that denies him agency. This implies Kathanar lapses into a mere performer without agency, one who cannot own his performance.

Moreover, Kathanar renditions exclude ritualistic practices of Christianity; instead it remained only to the protagonist's religious identity and apparently, his sartorial expressions seem to be the only affiliation that the priest maintains with Christian religiosity. Hence the priest does not necessarily fit in the institutional mandates of Christianity and his extraordinary powers do not come from the codifications of religion but from what is blasphemous to the religion. Also, the priest's genealogy is contested for he is a man from nowhere, an adopted child to the Syrian Christian pantheon itself. Thus the installation of Kathanar and his praxis as external to Christianity is more about the modernization of Christianity in Kerala which defines Syrian Christianity as a reformed religion. On another level, his non-belongingness even cancels out the existence of magic since it is a claim of an absent/missing Christian(nities) and hence lapses into fantasy twice removed from reality. Hence, arguably, the priest stands for the lost voices by playing a Syrian Christian and thereby he embodies a liminal space eternally.

In the narratives, these unidentified/unintelligible subjects never belong and their anonymity remains intact throughout. An instance that illustrates this is the way their stories come to an end. They are never given a proper death with rituals and ceremonies; their disappearances are mysterious. Examples are many in the cultural imaginations in Malayalam: the eponymous character in Kakkanadan's *Orotha*, the conjurer Ananthapadmanabhan in *Atharvam*, and here, Kadamattathachan. They often go "missing" into spaces unknown (Kathanar disappears into earth, Orotha goes missing, and Ananthapadmanabhan is set ablaze and his burning body vanishes into thin air).

Crucifixion/death is the dominant narrative of Christianity and foundational principle of Christian theological traditions. Moreover, considering the importance of public memory in religious traditions in terms of its geographic and melancholic

dimensions,<sup>131</sup> this denial and the mysterious departure of Kathanar allude to the lost legacies/genealogies of Christianity. At the end of the narrative, magic disappears, so do the performer. And all the aberrant subjectivities – magic, *yakshi*, and the priest – disappear. The burning of books in *Aithiyamala* and disappearance of the priest in the film, position magic as a self-immolating entity in that the closure of magic happens along with its masters, followers, and victims. The way in which this very presence of an absence is established, opens up, and speculate the possibility of alternative histories of faith traditions.

Language politics is a recurrent metaphor in Kathanar retellings. In fact, the contests and conciliations with the other in the story are enunciated through the difference of language. In other words, the differences between religious rituals and magic and that between dominance and subalternity lie in the expressions, in the logos. Here, language is both performative and symbolic. In the symbolic, the fear of magic (expressed by the church) is also the fear of a different utterance that can structure the subjectivities, which are conditioned by the moral theology, differently.

In the movie *Kadamattathachan* (1984), the priest's superior-bishop summons him and orders him to restrict his activities within the confinement of Christianity since a "mission" beyond the Church would be sacrilegious. According to the oath he had taken, a priest must stick to the rules and practices of the Church. He then promises his superior that he would refrain from the use of his powers for any kind of personal benefit but only for the wellbeing of the larger society and to ensure a moral order for universal good.

This implies; the oath, in fact, sets a boundary to the language. That is to say that, in the

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<sup>131</sup> I borrow the concept of "melancholic dimensions of public memory" from Nicholas S. Paliewicz and Marouf Hasian Jr (2016). The melancholic and geographic aspects of public memory in religious traditions involve the event of death, its commemoration, sacralisation of space, divinity, etc. that make the space and event important in religious history. They are foundational to the concept and contexts of pilgrimage, religious martyrdom, and sacrifice in Christian religious publics.

same way, Church anathematize the use of other languages of power inside Church, it also watches the language of the Church (embodied in the wandering priest). The oath of loyalty Kathanar makes seem to be a performative act that defines and sums up the contest and conciliations within the act of “performing” religion in its myriad ways.

The oath is the performative language. In oath, Agamben argues, “connection between words and things is not of a semantico-denotative type but performative” and therefore it becomes self-referential in character which is constituted by the “suspension of the normal denotative character of language” (Agamben 2010: 55). Thus, the oath refers to a “reality that it itself constitutes” (Agamben 2010: 55). According to this postulate, oath is an event in itself. Hence, in the story the swearing of oath is the point where all abstractions become real; religion, magic, and the priest who perform the oath. This suggests; the oath is about the use of a particular language and it is only through the oath that the language itself becomes real and available. *Aithihyamala* takes the authorial position from the priest by simply saying his language is unintelligible and his magic texts missing. Hence, it can be argued that it is Kathanar’s unavailability to his own language becomes a myth, not Kathanar. Therefore Kathanar affirms the discourse he embodies by claiming the language which dominant imaginations deemed non-existent and unreal. And this claim of language is a claim of space and history of the invisible identities within the social imaginaries of Kerala.

## **Afterword**

The film *Manichithrathazhu* offers a concluding remark by alluding to new possibilities which magic could seize in popular spaces in Malayalam. The modern therapeutic healer in the movie *Manichithrathazhu* is an ideal example to illustrate how modernity contains many of its oppositional positions and the curious ways in which it



manifests in the cultural imaginations. It would suggest the many possible mutations such texts can have, in turn signalling further prospects of research. The film exemplifies yet another dimension of magic and *badha* in the realm of Malayalam cinema by the characterization of a modern tale of healer who does not have to wear the garb of a priest or that of an ascetic male to establish superiority over his Brahmin counterpart as is the case with the Kathanar narrative. This would be the appropriate concluding statement suggestive of the afterlives the “premodern” priest has within Malayalam popular cinema. The role of the therapeutic healer offers an interface of religion, science and modernity via the Christian psychiatrist Dr. Sunny essayed by Mohanlal who arrives to cure the psychopath in the *tharavadu*.<sup>132</sup> In the film, the urban, upper caste woman Ganga, possessed by the Tamil dancer of a long-gone age Nagavally, tries to woo her poet-neighbour, in the apparent reliving of the past life of the dancer and her secret lover. Eventually, it is revealed that she had been identified with a “psychological condition.” The urban woman Ganga, Tamil dancer Nagavally and the foreign educated Christian psychotherapist and the towering presence of the *tharavadu* offers an interesting turn in the prototypical narrative of taming the ghost.

Dr. Sunny, well informed about the tantric practices in Hindu traditions visits Hindu temples and articulates this inclination in his very first scene through his sartorial expressions by the saffron cloths of an ascetic *sanyasi*. For the psychiatrist, the paraphernalia of modernity in India like modern medicine and psychotherapy comes second to the “traditional knowledge” regarding pathological conditions of mind and body. According to the implied, technological advancement is associated with the abstract space of the modern which is incongruous with the “real” spaces of tradition embodied in

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<sup>132</sup> The word in Malayalam refers to the traditional homestead of the landed gentry; often referring to the grand mansions of upper caste Hindu family in Kerala.

the *tharavadu*. At the end of the movie, he does not simply cure Ganga but exorcize the ghost who had possessed her and authors a distinct modern space for himself and for cinema. The miracle-healer is not hampered by ascetic masculinity either, instead, he signifies secular (Hindu) modernity similar to the ideological structuring of Malayalam films which propose a “Christian life-world” and “secular Christian hero” as we have already seen in the discussion on Malayalam cinema. This is evident where the film, in minor notes, pictures the psychiatrist’s feelings for the woman who had a short-lived marriage because of her *Chovvadosham*.<sup>133</sup> By alluding to the modern worldview of his religion Christianity, the psychiatrist expresses his feelings towards the Hindu woman he falls for by saying “we Christians do not believe in things like *Chovvadosham*.” Nakulan and Ganga’s return to urban space is symbolic of the mobility and transformation in Nair households as part of the dissolution of matrilineal family space to modern patrilineal nuclear family space while Dr. Sunny moves out only to return to complete his secular (Hindu) national subjectivity by marrying Sreedevi.

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<sup>133</sup> Bad omen in horoscope.

## Conclusion

The name is the time of the object. Naming constitutes a pact, by which two subjects simultaneously come to an agreement to recognise the same object. . . . If the subjects do not come to an agreement over this recognition, no world, not even a perception could be sustained for more than one instant.

Jacques Lacan (*Seminar II*, 169-170)

Difference should be our only value today.

Gianni Vattimo (*Interview*, 161)

In this thesis, I have attempted an exploration of Christianity in Kerala in terms of its historical legacies of difference and diffusion manifested in the many communities, popular memories, and the languages of interpreting and invoking the sacred. In doing so, I tried to engage with the conditionality wherein a normative Christianity surfaces in the social imaginary of the Malayalam speaking community. The political premises within which the ideas of religion, community, and belief structure a religious subject is the fundamental question this study tried to grapple with by examining the visual registers of the popular.

It may be suggested that delineating the distinct taste and spectatorial imaginations that define Christianity is as complex as how it is an experiential category and a cultural history in itself. This implies that the permutations of Christianity as a religious category problematize the category of religious community which is axiomatic of the multiple genealogies of Christianity in the region. These permutations are by and large designed and defined by the minority identity of Christian self. And therefore, this research tried to examine how the predicament of a minority structures the representational politics and thereby configure visual publics in the region. Thus, for Christians, a religious minority in Kerala with precarious histories of conversions and transformations, as I have traced in Chapter one, all performances are but political and

hence incomplete. Thinking along this, the embodiments of religion in the visual regimes signal the region's complex community histories and political polarizations in the contemporary. This complexity, in fact, facilitates new avenues to understand Christianity in the region which differ in terms of caste and community identity and religious practices.

The specific focus of the study is post-1990s' visual domains in Kerala where one can notice the animated sphere of religion which is not necessarily bound by the "secular rationality" of cinema, but rather with diverse forms of the political category of religion. As it has been discussed so far, the visual regimes post-1990s in the language of Malayalam offer heterogeneous and outwardly exclusive domains of Christian representations. For instance, the difference between cinema and television space is informed by the different visual publics as well as evolving religious publics of Christianity.

As discussed in Chapter two, the post-1990s Malayalam cinema presents a Syrian Christian identity which is institutionalized to produce narratives of dominance with a modernity experience predicated on it. The chapter problematizes different aspects of imagining/presenting a Syrian Christian subject, which is the dominant "other" in Malayalam cinema where Muslims and Dalits are categorically used to evoke victimhood or villainy. That is, in contemporary Kerala, the new identities of communities and their energies unfolded new landscapes of self-articulation and interpretations of the idea of modernity. For the privileged community of Syrian Christians, the articulated self in the discursive domain of visual publics bear testimony to their changing loyalties within the old and new regimes of power in the region. They have always employed strategic

relationships to engage with different regimes of power<sup>134</sup> and consequently, the experiences of faith tend to remain outside the community ethos. For them, thus, the community is essentially an ideological one than an experiential one. Thus the political modernity of Kerala marked Syrian Christians as a manageable form of community, unlike other communities which are bound by a shared sense of religious experience and subjectivity. Thus the representations of Syrian Christians in the cinematic imaginations post-1990s continue to propose the impossible secular modern desire, albeit through an emphasis of the same.

Chapter three tried to extend the argument of minoritization by examining the engagement between community identity and the paradigm of art and aesthetic judgment/value. K. J. Yesudas – a Latin Catholic by birth and a practising Hindu – is studied as an event in this discourse in view of his phenomenal presence in the cultural public sphere of Kerala. Importantly, Yesudas's success is marked by the negation of his subaltern Christian subjectivity and therefore his success hides many problematic contours of the discourses than it reveals. The analysis elucidates that Yesudas had to translate his subaltern Christian self to a hegemonic Hindu masculine figure (which is also a conscious manifestation of Syrian Christian image) in order to become the legitimate icon of Kerala's modernity aspirations. That is to say that the singer has to constantly engage with his religious identity by an equally potent negation of his subaltern self. By implication, both Syrian Christian self-articulations as a hegemonic Hindu masculine subject and a Latin Christian's writing of the self as a Syrian Christian male use the selfsame secular reason. Here, the minority/subaltern religious identity is considered as an excess and an impasse which has to be transformed and translated to the

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<sup>134</sup> Though Syrian Christians have a shared a sense of community and past, they are not a politically undivided group in modern Kerala. This difference has been the determining factor in the equations of electoral politics, wherein the loyalties are often directed by specific local and sectarian dilemmas and demands of which many of the Syrian Christian sects find each other at loggerheads.

historically available model of Syrian Christianity. The historical condition that necessitates this translation, in fact, points towards the untold narratives of an actually existent indigenous Christian tradition which is outside the monotheistic western idea of religion.

The renditions of Kadamattathu Kathanar become an important text in this context which is examined in Chapter four. This analysis took up the story of Kadamattathu Kathanar and its different publics in terms of the genealogies they represent. This attempt of reviving and retelling of the story of a “premodern,” supposedly ninth century Christian priest, thus, attests the fact that there has always been an alternative history possible, which may challenge and question the existing paradigms of understanding Christian legacy of the region. The secular Syrian Christian and the premodern Christian priest thus become the symptom of the same historical impasse. Speculatively, it can be proposed that this return of the repressed and the minor positions within and without signal the possibility of another history of the region as well as religion. Thus, the liminal spaces and spectral speeches in the cultural imagination can be taken as indicative of the lost wor(l)ds of Christian traditions in the region.

Thinking along this line; the trajectory of the endless translation of identities can be juxtaposed with the idea of conversion in Christianity. This suggests that conversion is not only a historical condition but also acts as an ontological interpretation of Christian subjectivity in modern Kerala which has to translate itself incessantly to make it a historical category. It is this impossible possibility that is enunciated in the popular narratives on minority subjectivity and the texts and instances discussed in this study chronicle this idea of being an impossible possibility.

It would not be wrong to argue that it is within this historical condition that Christianity in Kerala started to be identified essentially with histories of capital and colonial modernity and thereby categorically erasing its other genealogies. At stake here are the political premises of the shifts and mutations of Christian identity and the way they engage with and define the idea of region and modernity in contemporary Kerala.

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To extend the argument further, it would be significant to look at the contemporary extensions of Christian presences in the visual spaces of the popular in Malayalam. The recent debate on the film *Angamali Diaries* (Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery, 2017) which narrativizes the life of Vincent Pepe, the member of a devout Catholic family, can take forward the discussion in a different direction. Apparently, Pepe neither has any grand narrative of Syrian Christian supremacy to claim nor the cultural baggage of “secular” Christian unlike typical Christian masculine figures of the 1990s. Pepe belongs to a group of economically and socially underprivileged struggling young men. In closer reading, *Angamali Diaries* offers a different aesthetics of representation and representational politics of Christian community in terms of its political economy and cultural specificities. The film ignited a debate on the “religious” elements in cinema when the online portal of a TV channel reviewed it as a Christian communal-gangster movie that glorifies violence.<sup>135</sup> This critique further unleashed a popular debate in new media spaces which questioned the validity of such readings itself. By implication, both the critique and the responses to it emphasize the same logic and anxieties that emphasize the impossibility of certain category of Christian representation, which is at variance with the dominant forms of Christianity available in Malayalam cultural imaginary at large.

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<sup>135</sup> “Angamaliyile Pradhanamanthrimar” (“The Prime Ministers of Angamali”) *janamtv.com*

To cite another instance, recently Malayalam Television channel *Colours TV* started airing a new hagiography *Parishudhan (The Saint, 2017)*, which tells the story of Parumala Thirumeni<sup>136</sup>; a Christian saint of Syrian Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church comes under the Oriental Christian traditions, to which the priest Kadamattathu Kathanar allegedly belongs to. Apparently, the production team has the blessings of the supreme head of the Orthodox Church in Kerala<sup>137</sup> and the hagiography proceeds not as a biopic but through the memory of believers' divine experiences of miracles. Such attempts can be viewed as regional Church's aspirations to weave out a memory which has geographical and experiential dimensions that facilitate an assertive community self-fashioning.

The potentials and prospects of such discourses and how the memories of immediate and distant pasts conflate to produce an archaeology of Christianities in the region is a different area of study that requires rigorous investigation and thought, which could be a potential extension of this research. Nonetheless, the diversities of the visual regimes of Christianity that this thesis engages with signify both the untold histories of Christianity in South India at large and the political implications they can bring into the contemporary understanding of religion and its interstices.

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<sup>136</sup> Saint Gheevarghese Mar Gregorios (1848 -1902), known as Parumala Thirumeni (Bishop of Parumala), was a bishop of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of Kerala who is buried in Parumala, Kerala. He is the first person to be proclaimed saint in the Church and Parumala is the most famous pilgrim centre of Orthodox Church.

<sup>137</sup> The supreme head of the Church, the Metropolitan himself was present in the public event which officially launched the serial which clearly testifies the Church's approval of the content and context of the programme.



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## Appendix



Fig 1. Way Of The Cross At Kurisumudi (Hill Of The Holy Cross), Malayattor , Ernakulam – A Major Pilgrim Centre Associated With St. Thomas

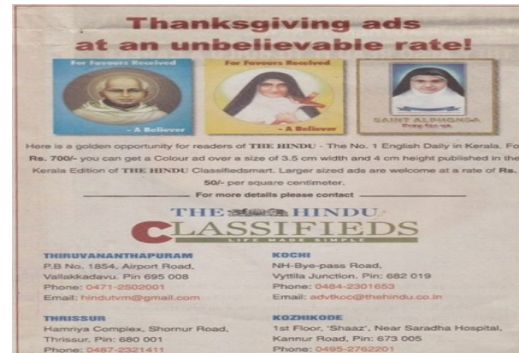


Fig 2: Advertisement from *The Hindu* featuring saints (Fr. Chavara, Sr. Euphrasia, and Sr. Alphonsa). 17 August 2015.



Fig 3: Images from *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle)  
Source: <http://vimochanasamaram.blogspot.in>



Fig 4: Images from *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle)  
Source: <http://vimochanasamaram.blogspot.in>



Fig 5: Film poster of *Thomasleeha* [*Thomas the Apostle*]; Dir. P. A. Thomas, 1975



Fig 6: Promotional image of the film *Snapakayohannan* [*John the Baptist*]; Dir. P. Subramaniam, 1963



Fig 7: Film poster of *Christmas Rathri* [The Christmas Night]; Dir. P. Subrahmaniam, 1961



Fig 8: Film poster of *Kottayam Kunjachan*; Dir. T. S. Suresh Babu, 1990



Fig 9: Film poster of *Nasrani*; Dir. Joshy, 2007



Fig 10: Film poster of *Christian Brothers*; Dir. Joshy, 2011



Fig 11: Film poster of *Manasinakkare* [Beyond Thoughts]; Dir. Sathyan Anthikad, 2003



Fig 12: Film poster of *Lelam* [The Auction]; Dir. Joshy, 1997





Fig 13: Film poster of *Pranjyettan*; Dir. Ranjith, 2010



Fig 14: Film poster of *Amen*; Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery, 2013



Fig 15: Film poster of *Amen*; Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery, 2013



Fig 16: Film poster of *Angamaly Diaries*; Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery, 2017



Fig 17: From *Mathrubhoomi's Star & Style*, Jan 2017



Fig 18: Various texts published on Popular Music in Malayalam



Fig 19: Film poster of *His Highness Abdullah*; Dir. Sibi Malayalil, 1990



Fig 20: Film poster of *Bharatham*; Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1991



Fig 21: Film poster of *Kamaladalam*. Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1991



Fig 22: *Dasettan Exclusive Today in Club FM*. Promotional of special programmes in Club FM radio channel on the occasion of *Dasettan's* (Yesudas as popularly referred) 75<sup>th</sup> birthday (10 Jan. 2015), *Mathrubhumi Newspaper*.



Fig 23: K. J. Yesudas at a *Kacheri* (Carnatic music concert)



Fig 24: Book cover - *Das Capital: An Autobiography of a Malayali Youth with Yesudas as his Capital*. Subash Chandran, 2012



Fig 25: Image from *Thiruvaabharanam* published as a *Sabarimala Special Issue* by *Malayala Manorama*, 2016



Fig 26: Yesudas, during one of his visits to Sabarimala



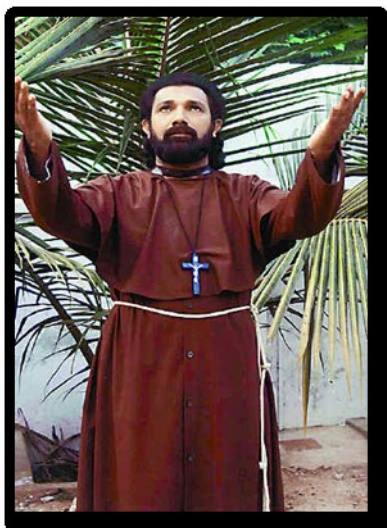


Fig 27: Screen grab from the serial *Kadamattathu Kathanar*



Fig 28: Screen grab from the serial *Kadamattathu Kathanar*



Fig 29: Image of the tomb, believed to be Kathanar's, located at Kadamattom Church, Ernakulam

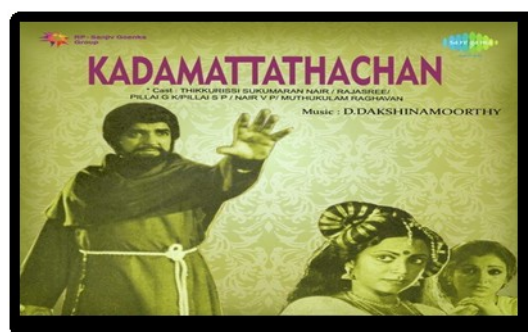


Fig 30: Film poster of *Kadamattathachan*; Dir. N. P. Suresh, 1984



Fig 31: Screen grab from the serial *Alphonsamma*. Asianet 2009



Fig 32: Film poster of *Kadamattathachan*; Dir. K. R. George Thariyan, 1966

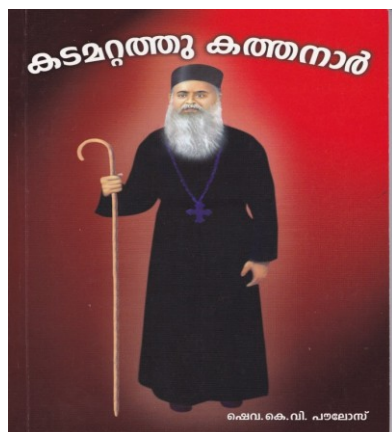


Fig 33: Book Cover of *Kadamattathu Kathanar* by K. V. Paulose



Fig 34: A picture of the ritual performances near the well near Kadamattom Church. One of the myths claims that this is the spot where Kathanar vanished.



Fig 35: Notice board in the Kadamattom Church premises, Ernakulam. It declares sorcery or any kind of magic performed as blasphemous.



Fig 36: Lighting the lamp by the Supreme head of the Orthodox Church during the launch of the serial *Parishudhan*  
Courtesy: Facebook



Fig 37: Promotional Image the serial *Parishudhan*