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Portraits of Contradiction: Kerala's Popular Cinema and the Shifting Narratives of Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

Popular cinema, particularly domestic melodrama, has played a vital role in understanding how families interact with the state and how the popular understanding of the subject changes. The concept of normal subjects has changed drastically with modern norms superimposed on pre-modern social identities. This resulted in a composite construct of subject normality, including pre-modern belief systems and values hidden within the modern secular state's norms. Malayali popular culture narrates the internal biases of the population better than the analyses of 'economics'. Kerala has a unique development trajectory, with family norms and popular cinema playing significant roles in shaping the state's narrative structures. The state's development model is influenced by its economic objectives, with the family being seen as the building blocks of modern society. Popular cinema in Kerala has been instrumental in capturing the contradictions and exceptions in the state's development. Domestic melodramas, which revolve around male subjects, have provided commentary on the discourse of the state and economics. The context of Kerala's popular cinema and its connection with the 'social' of the state allows for various points of ideological import. Popular cinema is a space where the 'exception', resultant contradictions, and connection between popular culture in Kerala during 1989-2009 and the new face of governmentality are portrayed through domestic melodramas. These films enable us to better understand the attitudes of the people engendered by the changed context.

Keywords: *Governmentality, Malayalam Cinema, Foucault, Melodrama, Kerala Model*

Histories of postcolonial states generally mark the declaration of Independence as a unique event that facilitates a return to roots as well as a conscious move towards modernity. These objectives are realized by a process of national policy-making for development, prioritizing the economic challenges. It is assumed that in the eventuation of these policies of the state, a positive human development also occurs. But this assumption does not often withstand analysis. It is easily possible to cite states with high illiteracy percentages, high birth rates and low hygienic awareness despite waves of heavy industrialization and increased agricultural productivity. Modernity in the attitudes of the subjects, therefore, is not directly inferable from a history of the industrialization of the state. The indices usually used to

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appraise the modernity of a state's people emphasize on their collective response towards the modern institutions of education, health, new family norms and so on. It is assumed that by assessing the attitudes to such 'pockets of modernity', the human development of a given place at a given time can be gauged. 'Modern' is a complicated word to use in the context of Humanities because various fields of scholarship contextualize the term variously, according to their discipline's perspectives. The political and financial concepts of modernity, and the intriguing literary dimensions, namely modernism, are just two of these many. Nevertheless there is a common assumption in all the disciplines connected to the 'modern'--that the domain under discussion has some connection with a certain idea of a government of the public. This concept of government, the modern welfare state, makes possible the production of specific kinds of knowledge. A fairly large amount of literature exists on the discourse of the 'modern state' in 19th century Europe. Eminent scholars like Michel Foucault, Simon During, Colin Gordon, Graham Burchell, Pasquale Pasquino, Jacques Donzelot, Anthony Giddens, Barry Smart and Francois Ewald have attempted to narrate the visible and the concealed histories of the modern state--calling their attempts, generally, 'genealogies of the state'.

The most important insight that the genealogies of the state offer as they delineate the new sovereign state in 19th century Europe is that, as a result of the confluence of newer institutions of knowledge, i.e. medicine, prison, schools etc. under the government, a radically new discourse of power emerged: under the sovereign state, people came to undergo and exercise power simultaneously. This change in the distribution of power created a dramatically different set of subject positions in the modern society. Foucault called the new format, a 'disciplinary society'--in such networks, the transformations in social institutions that define the subject are usually intentionally produced by individuals and groups in response to consciously-recognized economic and political needs. The underlying political anatomy of a disciplinary society is not to be perceived as a monolithic whole, but as the articulation of innumerable localized, intentionally-produced processes that demarcate the normal and abnormal subjects. This insight into the nature of modern power pioneered a new understanding of history and social sciences. One of the first considerations here is the analysis of various modalities involved in installing the modern state's format in India. The import of modernity and the concept of nation, and the rise of nationalism in India are all contested fields in Indian history. The explications of the mechanisms of the (European)

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disciplinary state, as conceived by Foucauldian scholars cannot be applied in Indian contexts without necessary qualifications.

Beneath the seen and the said of the postcolonial state that has adapted modernity as an heirloom from colonial context, the popular imagination recycles pre-modern value-systems and hierarchies making the culture a palimpsest experience. For the modern state, pre-modern ideas of caste and feudalism mean very little since a recognition of such categories make 'economics' difficult. In Foucault's essay "Governmentality", three levels of state's governmental interventions are referred. One is moral, which affects the personal life of the subject. Secondly, there is economics, which concerns 'families.' At the final point, we have politics, which concerns the state and its administration. It was assumed in the beginning of the discourse of modern state that a hierarchy of person-family-government can be drawn to describe the way administrative apparatus works. In other words, a moral person can be treated as the foundation for an economic family, and families in turn group together to become an efficient state. As the state replaced the earlier sovereign completely, the reverse of this hierarchy was also taken as legitimate: an effective state begets a strong economics and in turn generates well-behaved subjects. This foundational assumption of the modern state meets with the native contexts when modernity gets imported to colonies (Foucault 80).

India received modernity from its colonial period. The acceptance of colonial modernity in the public realm and a very conservative rejection of western modernity was typical of the nationalist discourse. Partha Chatterjee has perspectivised this phenomenon in terms of an 'inside' and 'outside' bifurcation of the society. According to him, 'the inside' rejected modernity and 'the outside' vigorously received it. The 'inside' contained families, and families make the building blocks of the state. It is not practically possible to keep families in 'the inside', 'protected' from policies of the westernized state. At the same time, 'families' apparently promise a sort of privacy. This privacy and its appearance of being severed from the state, make 'family' a very important context in one's exploration of subject statuses. In this sense, domesticity is a meeting place of policing and pre-modern value systems. Experts in economics have minutely analyzed the 'data' and made comments about Kerala's ups and downs. They created and addressed a subject that occupied the hierarchy of state-economics-subject. At the other end, regarding the subject of the popular discourse, analyses of popular cinema proved to be a useful platform. The history of evolution of popular cinema, especially the domestic melodrama, records well how families interact with the policing of the state and

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how with each contingent turn in state's policy-making, the popular understanding of the subject undergoes a change. Through an analysis of popular films, especially domestic melodramas, it becomes clear that the concept of normal subject has changed drastically from its original implications. The reinforcement of the norms of the modern state over pre-modern familial and relational practices complicated the scenario. New ideas of defining normality by locating the abnormal other in madness, non-conformity to health policies, non-education, out-migration and other modern institutional paradigms were superimposed on the pre-modern sets of social identities like the mad-as-harmless, healthy-as-a-personal-possibility, educated-as-a-caste-high person, or migrant-as-symbolizing-wanderlust. The result was a composite construct of subject normality, including pre-modern belief systems and values hidden as subtexts to the modern secular state's norms. Through the decades, these hidden proclivities rendered themselves more and more visible. Within the larger discourse of modern citizenship, this surfacing was legitimized.

Trying to map (necessitated by the dissolution of earlier social certainties and general revivalistic tendencies) the construct of the dominant subject in a period when, the way of life was drastically reconfigured, entails an analysis of the contemporary popular culture. The subject addressed by the governmental discourses in the 1990s differs from the subject addressed by the period's popular culture. In the 1960s, to a certain degree, the popular culture's idea of subject coincided with the subject in the governmental discourse. The course of this severing of state and the popular subjects was located in the 'exceptional' developmental trajectory of Kerala that had betrayed large groups in the society, left a back-broken government education system, an ineffectual public food distribution. The 'fall' of popular cinema was seen as a concomitance of the state's deferred developmental promises, the dawning of pro-Liberalization economic policies and the advent of corporate media in the opinion building in civil society in the 1990s. The global capital rooted more strongly in the social web of Kerala by 2010. The hints that were visible in the cultural vibes of 1989, take real form through the 1990s as manifest revivalistic tendencies. It seems impossible to understand the cultural leanings of Kerala in the two decades (1989-1999 and 1999-2009) by assessing the economic statistics of the state. In its original form, statistics is the modern state's science. It makes state theoretically and practically possible. All the major indices of the modernity of the state – health, jails, education, etc. – are created with the help of statistics and the consequent discovery of the 'population.' These primarily Foucauldian ideas

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regarding state and modernity can be used to draw important inferences regarding how postcolonial contexts give rise to a complicated cultural understanding.

In the 1990s, there were unmistakable hints regarding the re-installation of pro-Savarna/ pro-native (as against migrant) ideologies in the state. The larger discourse of modern state could not contain these ideas in its rubric and therefore continued to use the same norms for defining the subject as it had been doing in the beginning: the subject as secular, health-conscious, inclined to modern schooling and serving the state as a 'responsible' adult. The 'economics' of the state, as is the practice of its Western original, used the family as unit that inculcated the state's progressive ideological stances such as secularism and holistic development. In economic analyses of the region, the reverse hierarchy of a good sovereign state trickling down its 'goodness' to the subject at the other end through a strong family structure was narrated continuously. In its evolution, the Malayalee popular culture, narrates the internal biases of the 'population' in a better fashion than that of the analyses of 'economics'. In the 1950s, when popular cinema was in its infancy, different strains, such as Hindu mythology and folk dramas, were adapted into films on screen; they resembled folk dramas in structure and were heavily influenced by Tamil popular cinema. Generally, in the late 1950s and 1960s, there was a clear tendency in popular cinema to narrate the selfhood of Malayalee. As critics have shown, the 'vadakkan paattu' films and the films about local heroes who fought the British were early attempts to create something concretely Malayalee as different from the Tamil movies. With films like *Neelakkuyil*, *Navalokam*, *Newspaper Boy*, *Rarichan Enna Pouran*, etc. released around 1960, the Malayalee started identifying himself/herself in popular cinema. In the ensuing decade, the 1960s, the promises and hopes of a 'developed' society reflected highly in the popular cinema. However, beneath the apparent progressive nature of the plots of the melodramas of the 1960s, critics identify a hypocritical bias that supports the dominant subject in the pre-modern Kerala.

In his analysis of *Neelakkuyil*, GP Ramachandran, for instance, notes how the melodrama of the plot is hinged on the suffering of the Dalit female character. In the 1970s, critics generally noticed a tendency towards soft-porno themes dominating popular cinemas. By the end of this decade, more stereotypes started appearing on Malayalam screen, such as the angry young man and the child-protagonist. Through the 1980s, the regressive tendencies that were latent in the early films slowly gained more visibility in the structure of the popular cinema. This retrogression found 'acceptable' articulation in the themes of the popular cinemas of the

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1990s. Unlike the previous decades, the 1990s promoted the recession from progressive concepts in the popular imagination. Critics have read this phenomenon as a necessary parallel to the liberalized economic contexts. This change in the subject statuses appearing in the popular cinema was a decisive transformation in the social configuration of modern Kerala. The phenomenal rise of television in popular consciousness in the 2000s also accelerated the imprinting of pre-modern value system.

Kerala has a specific development trajectory, a well-grounded sense of family norms and an extremely flourishing popular cinema. The links between these apparently disparate points tell an intriguing story of give and take. Social scientists had long perceived the state of Kerala as a 'model' of socio-economic excellence. Though a part of India, Kerala marked its development model very differently from other Indian states. When families are imagined to be the building blocks of modern society, popular family dramas impinge on the policing of the state in its narrative structures. Despite the seemingly trans-historical elements, the meaning of the family in the discourse of the state is found to be grounded in its 'economic' objectives. The cultural complications involved in importing and perpetrating the European idea of modernity needs to be measured. It brought forth relevant debates already at hand: the writings of Nehru, Gandhi and the first Constitution committee about the developmental path to be adopted by independent India form the foundation of the discussion. In its turn, Partha Chatterjee's argument, that colonial modernity enjoyed a bi-partite reception in India, was taken for reconsideration. Chatterjee concluded in The Nation and its Fragments that in the Indian society, during colonial period, Western models of economy and government was acceptable only in the "outer" realm and that the "inner" domain was kept away from the influences of 'Western culture'. It was not possible for the nationalists to perform this exclusivisation since accepting the modern state will imply using the family as units in the policing practices. Though they might insist on keeping up the pre-modern practices in 'the family', soon families would adapt to modernity's schooling and 'medicalization'. Unlike other states where the modern state was only reluctantly and qualifiedly installed, the population in Kerala was eager to install modernity and 'develop'. The desirable and much-lauded human development statistics of Kerala in the two decades from 1960 to 1980 was contextualized against the first Communist government's policy making in the state. The objectives of Planning in Kerala, for instance, differed from the national denominators: it expressed a clearer and surer understanding of 'the needs of the population'. The broad

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objectives of Kerala's first five Five Year Plans (1951-79), as different from India's national Plan, concentrated on humanistic needs rather than a rampant industrialization of the state. Popular cinema becomes identified as a space where this exception, resultant contradictions, and the connection between the popular culture, in Kerala are portrayed.

Through domestic melodramas that revolve around embattled male subjects, the cinema was able to give a parallel commentary to the discourse of the state and economics. From the 1960s to the 1980s, in different stereotypes and changing plot structures, the cinema communicated the destiny of the modern state in Kerala and the state's implications in the popular attitudes. By the 1990s and with the introduction of SAR in the national policy, the state came to face a dire financial crisis. The mass return of the Gulf migrants because of the Gulf war and other crises in the emirates also added to the difficulties of the state during this period. Popular cinema of the period reconfigures its understanding of the subject statuses in Kerala during this period. What was only a latent current in the narratives earlier, the pro-Savarna and anti-migrant stances emerged forcefully to the surface. These emergences were discussed within the construct of the normal family and therefore contained an air of axiomatic legitimization. An effort to define the 'self', with respect to the othering of new criteria of 'excludabilities,' was launched in the domestic melodramas in the turn of the decade. This trend and the subjectivities thus defined continued to influence the cinemas of the next two decades. It became imperative therefore to see how the films of the 1990s differed from earlier films and how the popular imagination defined the normal subject through melodramas. Arguably, Kerala's most successful attempts in the genre of cinema were released during this period.

These melodramas focused on the sufferings of men as different from (western) melodrama's usual practice of emphasizing on the distressed female. The social changes in the civil society of Kerala are read with the ideological function of the contemporary melodramas as connected to each other. The emergent modern governmental apparatus in Europe was found to have necessitated the subjects' normalization, and helped, partly, in evolving the melodramatic genre. Tracing the history of the "social" in the liberal democratic political register culminated in contextualizing 'colonial modernity' and the resultant "civil society" in the colonies. The ramshackle systems of kinship in peasant communities came to be reconfigured into the modern family system where the property transfer could happen through generations. A modern state requires the family to stay as a unit of governance. In

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films like Valsalyam (1993), when the pre-modern feudal family is presented with an air of false nostalgia, this aspect of land reform and modernity is being called to question. When the state tries to address a subject who has revamped his family as a non-autonomous building block of modernity, the popular cinema creates and celebrates a subject that unmakes the building by reworking the land-owning feudal class norms into his family. The context of Kerala's popular cinema and its connection with the 'social' of the state, various points of ideological import can be traced. A special case of defining the mad ('unhealthy) in the popular imagination so as to separate the 'normal' from the 'abnormal', how the conception of madness evolved as the modern state started to stabilize itself in the region have a special import in this framework. Three films of the turn of the decade, *Thaalavattam*, *Innale* and *Ulladakkam* show that through the decade, there occurred a grounding of the mad subject as an excludable body. If the definition of the mad was hazy in the 1970s and 1980s, it gained stronger connotation in the films of the 1990s. Progressively, popular films exhibit a tendency to brand and oust the mad bodies from the general society. Melodramas like *Thaalavattam* (a remake of the Jack Nicholson starrer Hollywood melodrama, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*), *Ulladakkam* and *Innale* deal with the role of hospitals in constructing normality in a modern state, the popular understandings of disease and mental abnormality. However, in thoroughly localizing the story, the director, Priyadarsan, directly communicates Kerala's social attitude towards mental hospitals. Mohanlal plays a mentally aberrant subject in *Thaalavattam*, who is heavily penalized by the head nurse and chief doctor for his childish pranks. A close-reading of the film shows how it reflects the popular assumptions of the given period. *Ulladakkam* is a more morbid melodrama of the 90s directed by Kamal. Mohanlal plays a psychiatrist in this movie. Amala plays the female patient who falls in love with the doctor. The story is a telling commentary on the received notions of what goes on in a mental hospital. The hospital is taken as a parallel living system, drafting its own rules and regulations to 'tame' and 'normalize' the mad. *Innale* directed by Padmarajan, is perhaps the most poignant of the three, narrating the travails of a partially amnesiac patient who tries to carve a subject-slot for herself in the society that she accidentally ends up in. Though many earlier films have dealt with characters that lost their memories, this issue is elaborately considered here. Memory-loss is not an instrument to solve the riddles of plot, as in commercial cinemas; instead, the disease itself is the riddle in the movie.

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The condescension and alienation that Gulf migrant subject undergoes is identified to be a reflection of the general anti-modern tendencies that appeared in the popular imagination. The centrality of Gulf in the 'success' story of Kerala model of development is also pertinent in this context. The Gulf is, practically, a 'wonderland' in the imagination of Kerala youth. A progressive sense of alienation of the migrant (his subject position) is raced in the popular cinema (as in the two films *Visa*, and *Varavelpu*). Films like *Marunaattil oru Malayali*, *Vilkanundu Swapnangal*, *Garshom*, *Ikkareyanente Manasam*, and *Arabikkatha* are a few instances. *Varavelpu* discusses one of the most pertinent questions that Gulf migration has asked the Malayali in the 1990s: how could/should the Gulf returnee relocate himself in the society of Kerala? In *Varavelpu*, Mohanlal plays the role of an incompetent investor who has returned from a term of Gulf migration. The movie was a major hit in Kerala. It showcases the militancy of labor in Kerala, the trade unionism that sabotaged industrial capitalism in the state and the sloppy and secondary status of the subject that tries to settle in Kerala after a long spell of migratory life. Visa is a more maudlin popular film that tries to tap audiences' emotions by loud stereotypes associated with the cultural discourses connected with Emigration. Unlike hospitals, Gulf is a register that has evolved dramatically over the past decade. The Gulf has become more familiar to the audience since these films. By 2000, one finds that all of the films were shot in Dubai. More airports, lesser airfares and a recouping of the Gulf job-market in the late 2000s, have brought the experience of exile to a new crossroad. In 2009, when the most recent Gulf story, *Arabikkatha* hit the screen, the place has even become a vantage point to criticize 'the Leftist decline'. The Gulf migration is responsible for engendering some of the major male subject-positions in the state's social fabric.

The subjects the state (created and) addressed in the discourse of the state of Kerala are firmly located in stable families, secular, 'medicalized', educated and inclined to emigrate and employ themselves. This subject is delineated in the popular literature and films of the early decades of the state's formation. Through the 1960s and 1970s came films and literature that depicted a modern subject that tried to address the newer state's 'modern' positions. A sense of understanding family as a constituent of disciplinary government can be generally seen in these specimens. By the late 1980s, the subjects addressed in the popular culture demonstrated a tilt towards the pre-modern value systems and ideas. Early 1990s was a period of policy restructuring for the entire nation. In accordance with the larger picture,

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Kerala also reconfigured its developmental dimensions in its Seventh Five Year Plan. The resultant reconfiguration of the normality-construct in the popular films, especially domestic melodramas (since their narratives focus on the governmental unit of family) is a major point of address. The extreme dents and paradoxes between the subject of the state and the subject of popular cinema can be seen during the 1990s and 2000s. The creation of a new 'cultural citizenship' is evidenced during the period. The new cultural citizenship and its shared imaginaries narrate a society whose complicated tryst with modernity and later Liberalization revises pre-modern discourses.

Popular cinema is a space where the 'exception', resultant contradictions and the connection between the popular culture in Kerala during 1989-2009 and the new face of governmentality are portrayed through domestic melodramas. Popular culture and films enable us to understand better the people's attitudes engendered by the changed context. It shows that the Kerala model originally was to be found not in the Plans and policies of the state, but in the popular attitudes and mass will to come together for collective action. Kerala's most successful attempts in family melodrama were arguably released during the 1990s. The emphasis in these melodramas was always on embattled men. The work reads together the social changes in the civil society of Kerala with the ideological function of the contemporary melodramas. It begins with the history of melodrama as a genre, how it mediates and stages aspects of popular will, how it represents the moral dilemmas that underlie the mainstream culture, and how, by connecting modern institutions to conflicted characters, it is able to critique modernity effectively. The melodramatic narratives, from its early days in 19th century Europe to DW Griffith's Hollywood to postcolonial commercial cinema, has always mirrored the middle-class attitudes the assumptions of the legitimized culture in the society. Tracing the history of the "social" in the liberal democratic political register culminates in contextualizing 'colonial modernity' and the resultant "civil society" in the colonies.

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