

# **The Visual Culture of Mass Grief in Kerala: Juxtapolitical Formations of Melodrama in Cinema, Celebrity Funerals and Political Violence**

**Ph.D. Thesis**

**By**

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**DISCIPLINE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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# **The Visual Culture of Mass Grief in Kerala: Juxtapolitical Formations of Melodrama in Cinema, Celebrity Funerals and Political Violence**

**A THESIS**

*Submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree of*  
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*by*

**MUHSINA K K**



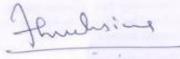
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# INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY INDORE

I hereby certify that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **The Visual Culture of Mass Grief in Kerala: Juxta-political Formations of Melodrama in Cinema, Celebrity Funerals and Political Violence** in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY** and submitted in the **SCHOOL OF Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Indore**, is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the time period from January 2020 to July 2025 under the supervision of Dr. Akshaya Kumar, Associate Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Indore.

The matter presented in this thesis has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree of this or any other institute.



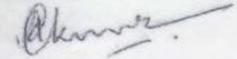
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This is to certify that the above statement made by the candidate is correct to the best of my/our knowledge.



28/07/2025

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**MUHSINA K K** has successfully given her Ph.D. Oral Examination held on 2/2/2026.



2/2/2026

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**Dr. AKSHAYA KUMAR**

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**To my Uppa and Umma**

# SYNOPSIS

## **The Visual Culture of Mass Grief in Kerala: Juxta-political Formations of Melodrama in Cinema, Celebrity Funerals and Political Violence**

### **Introduction**

This thesis examines the tension between melodrama and rationality in Kerala through the affective intensities of distinct mourning publics vis-à-vis their conflicts with the public sphere of the state. It is analysed through the visual cultures of three distinct cultural practices of mass grieving. In contrast to mourning within familial or private circles, it specifically addresses public forms of grieving, mediated through mass public attendance, collective rituals, and media spectacles. In particular, I analyse the melodramatic mobilisations of affective publics across three vital sites of mass grieving in Kerala: (1) the performative spectacles of public affect at celebrity funerals, (2) the cinematic mediations of affective solidarities in mourning in contemporary Malayalam cinema, and (3) the discursive construction of ‘martyrdom’ in public mourning/ commemorations of slain Communist Party workers. Grappling with the transformations of emotional outpouring in response to death into political theatres of mass grief, sites of subversive solidarities and mechanisms of ideological reproduction as elaborated respectively in the thesis chapters, I analyse how spectacles of their melodramatic excess, that rupture the performative topography of mourning, contest Kerala’s self-fashioning as an exceptional paradigm of rational modernity. This narrative of exceptionalism is hinged on its claim to have cultivated a distinctive rational public culture that purportedly transcends affective populist discourses from its mass cultural politics. By foregrounding the affective intensities of the melodramatic eruptions of the mourning publics, the study posits the emotional outpouring of the public towards death as an embodied site capable of defying the normative and discursive rationality over which the dominant idea of Kerala’s public sphere is based.

What lies at the core of this investigation is a contradictory relationship of a set of public discourses on Kerala’s public sphere, shaped by the state’s celebrated spatial and cultural infrastructures of public rationality, with mass affect. The state’s self-fashioning

as a rational modernity remains tethered primarily to the trajectory of its public sphere, manifested through print capitalism, networks of reading publics formed around newspapers, literary societies, public libraries and institutionalised campaigns for mass literacy and scientific rational education. This narrative of exceptionalism is also anchored by the cultural-political dynamics of its state formation, mass politics, among others. Kerala's political modernity is subsequently characterised by historically sedimented civic rationalism, political culture informed by institutionalised Leftist mobilisations and the public sphere shaped by social reform movements (Jeffrey 1992), contrary to the political and cultural conflicts that characterised state formation in other South Indian states.

Following this, the hegemony of textually mediated rational-critical deliberations has been pivotal to Kerala's privileging of realism as a dominant mode of address. Together, these cultural configurations produce a cultural-political mode of Malayali self-fashioning, anchored within a realist habitus that informs political imaginaries in Kerala's public sphere. This has subsequently resulted in the rise of a set of cultural, political and aesthetic discourses that reject melodrama, viewing it as an excessive aesthetic form or a low cultural mode which undermines the state's rational, progressive self-image. Kerala's narratives of exceptionalism actively distance public culture from these affective formations and position it as a deliberative space devoid of such "irrational" articulations, as highlighted through the conspicuous absence of star-driven political mobilisation, where cinematic charisma fails to translate into electoral power. These discursive manoeuvres systematically dismiss the generative potential of melodramatic formations, reinforcing Kerala's self-image as a space of bureaucratic rationality over affective political governance. Subsequently, I situate my argument that the proposed mourning publics constitute sites of subversion against the state's discursive rationality within the larger scholarship on the critiques of Kerala modernity. In this context, I posit the melodramatic emotional outpourings, particularly mass grieving and affective solidarities surrounding death, as a trope through which to interrogate the conflict of Kerala's public sphere with spectacles of public affect.

## Literature Review

The literature review is organised in two sections around two distinct thematic axes: the public sphere and mourning. A growing body of academic scholarship critiques Habermas's idealisation of the public sphere as a domain of rational-critical deliberation, for its exclusionary dynamics, pointing out how it presupposes the bracketing of social inequalities (Fraser 1990; Warner 2002). While Warner (2002) argues that the public sphere operates as a contested terrain of cultural production and difference, Fraser (1990) proposes a pluralistic model of multiple, antagonistic publics, including subaltern counterpublics. In conjunction, I foreground the constitutive tension between reason and emotion, one of the central fault lines in conceptualising the public sphere, as a critical framework for my analysis. Following Spinoza's (1994) conception of affect as rooted in *relational encounters* between bodies and their external milieu, I use the term to describe bodily and emotional intensities that move through assemblages of bodies, discourses, and materiality with regard to the relation between the public and the private. As a derivative, Ahmed (2004) analyses how emotional economies materially shape and govern public life. Mazarella's (2013, 2015, 2017) engagements with the affective experiences in relation to the crowd and social communication also inform my enquiries on the affective dynamics of mourning publics vis-à-vis their negotiations with public culture.

However, scholarship on the public sphere in the Indian context has focused primarily on how vernacular media ecologies, particularly print media, constitute regional public spheres in India (Orsini 2002; Jeffrey 2000; Varughese 2017). Orsini (2002) traces the role of standardised Hindi language in constructing a regional Hindi public sphere in early twentieth-century North India. Jeffrey (Vitali 2000) examines how the late twentieth-century surge in vernacular newspapers contributed to the rise of a more inclusive public sphere, facilitating grassroots political mobilisation by empowering regional audiences. Although situated in a different historical, political, and cultural context, a major corpus of academic inquiry into the public sphere in South India (Prasad 2014; Pandian 1992; Srinivas 2018) emphasizes the role of affective mobilisations, particularly those centred on linguistic sub-nationalism and ethnic populism, as key to

understanding its regional political formations and identity politics. These literatures show that visual culture, especially the melodramatic aesthetics of popular cinema, has been widely employed for mass mobilisation in the south Indian states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

Nonetheless, the academic literature on linguistic politics in Kerala focuses on how the standardisation of the Malayalam language, a process closely tied to the rise of print culture, enabled the disparate Malayalam-speaking communities to be imagined as part of a homogeneous Malayali public sphere (Jeffrey 2009; Arunima 2006; Mannathuakren 2021). Any critical inquiry into Kerala's public sphere must account for its media-generated public spheres. Offering a spatial history of modernity in Kerala, Harikrishnan (2022) argues that the everyday social spaces— ranging from literary associations and reading rooms to public clubs and markets— in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century acted as counter public spheres by challenging the caste, class barriers in accessing social spaces and led to their transformations as cosmopolitan social arenas. Varughese's (2017) work on the public deliberation of science within the context of emergent risk politics in Kerala provides a valuable framework for my analysis of the nuances of media-generated public spheres. In addition to the literature tracing the trajectory of consolidating scientific rationality in the public sphere, Mannathukkaren's (2021) work on communist history in South India has been particularly useful for my analysis of the role of Left cultural interventions in legitimising realism as the dominant mode of public address in Kerala. I have also extensively drawn from the scholarship on the critiques of Kerala modernity, which engages it as a contested ideological project caught between radical aspirations and structural limits (Devika 2010; Osella 2000; Tharamangalam 1998; Karinkurayil 2024). Building on this scholarship, I aim to address the scholarly gap in accounting for the role of melodramatic affect in understanding Kerala's public culture.

In addition, a lot of sociological and anthropological scholarship approaches mourning through its ritualistic significance, viewing it as key to fostering social cohesion and solidarity (Durkheim 2016; Parry 1994). Durkheim (2016) theorises mourning rituals as collective effervescent practices that reinforce social solidarity. Apart from this, many anthropological works examine mourning through its ritualist dimensions, analysing how

they mediate collective grief, negotiate the disruption that death has caused, while also exposing the material conditions surrounding mourning as a social process. Davies (2002) examines the role of material culture— such as graves, monuments, and memorials—in shaping collective memory and identity.

However, scholarship on mourning within the Indian context has largely been framed through anthropological inquiries into funerary rites. Parry (1994) explores the cultural and religious significance of dying in the Hindu holy city of Banaras, foregrounding the tension between the spiritual ideal of a "good death"— believed to result in *moksha* (liberation from rebirth)—and the commercialised realities of the death industry. Building on this framework, Singh (2022) analyses the death economy of Banaras, viewing the city as both a transformative spiritual landscape and a contested socio-economic terrain.

However, a growing body of scholarship explores how mourning transcends its conventional social and ritual functions to assume political significance, especially through ethical encounters with mortality that transform mourning into a distinctly political phenomenon (Butler 2004, 2016; Das 2006). Das (2006) analyses how grief and trauma in post-violence societies get inscribed in the everyday lives of survivors, manifesting the weight of unresolved loss in domestic routines, kinship ties, and ritualised mourning. Exploring mourning as an embodied cultural practice in popular culture, Sarkar (2020) analyses how the deep psychological scars that were left on the Indian psyche following the corporeal violence, displacement, and loss engendered by the 1947 partition resonate in the nation's cultural productions, especially in Bollywood cinema.

However, there is a significant dearth of academic literature on mourning in the context of Kerala. One of the few seminal contributions to this field is Cybil's monograph *From Ritual to Republic: Death as a Democratic Discourse* (2013) about the distinct ways in which the death of Sardar Gopala Krishnan—a schoolteacher and an activist of the Communist Party of India in the 1950s—is mourned in Kerala, employing the concepts of martyrdom and sacrifice. Whereas Menon (2024) examines the critical turns in the lives and deaths of two male Muslim converts within the secular rational fabric of Kerala's public sphere, focusing on the handling of their dead bodies and grieving their

death. Drawing on this gap, my research seeks to address the lack of scholarly literature on mourning and its negotiations with the public sphere, particularly in the context of Kerala.

## **Research Objectives**

The primary objective of the thesis is to analyse how mourning death can be analysed as a cultural site to examine the conflicts inherent in the dominant conceptualisations of the public sphere. Following this, I examine how spectacles of the melodramatic excesses of distinct mourning publics that rupture the performative topography of mourning, which was erstwhile legitimised through their confinement to domestic/familial spheres, unravel the tension between melodrama and realism in Kerala's public sphere. Locating this conflict as a historical burden emanating from the trajectory of its public sphere, upon the sedimented cultural capital of print-mediated rational deliberations and its manifestations in the privileging of realism as the dominant mode of address, I grapple with how the state engages in uneasy negotiations with the melodramatic excess at mourning sites. Thus, rather than viewing melodramatic transgressions in mourning merely as disruptions that expose the limits of the state's rationalist mediation of affect, I aim to examine how the visceral intensity of public mourning that unsettles the rational civic order compels the state to engage in an uneasy negotiation with these melodramatic excesses. The thesis thus investigates the unique cultural and political dynamics of this negotiation between state power and public emotion, with its underpinnings in the larger cultural politics of the state. Bringing the intersections of mass participation and melodramatic transgressions via the visual culture of public mourning into conversation, the thesis offers an affective account of the state's public culture, focusing on its entanglement with melodramatic mobilisations of public affect.

## **Methodology**

Methodologically, this thesis employs a qualitative case study approach to map the visual culture of public mourning in Kerala. This is done by analysing a range of visual cultural materials, engaging them as key sites of affective, cultural and political mediation. To explore the performative dimensions of public affect during celebrity funerals, I examine

both the in-person attendance and the emotional outpouring of the public at the funerals of specific public figures and their live television broadcasts, as well as the circulation on social media platforms. The chapter on cinematic mediations of the affective solidarities in mourning draws on a recent corpus of Malayalam films, bringing into conversation the broader ideological and industrial shifts in contemporary Malayalam cinema. The chapter on public mourning and commemoration of slain Communist Party workers engages an array of visual cultural texts, including televised funeral coverage, popular visual tributes (such as posters, graffiti, and murals), and commemorative infrastructures (martyr memorials, statues and territorial inscriptions of martyrdom), as well as their cinematic adaptations in the form of political biopics. This study is, however, theoretically grounded in the thematics of public sphere, affect, and melodrama, with particular attention to their underpinnings in the state's public culture. I have drawn on methodologies from cultural studies, media studies and visual anthropology to engage with the visual texts of mourning, particularly in their melodramatic form. A preliminary fieldwork conducted in parts of Kannur and Malappuram has provided an ethnographic grounding for this study.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is organised within four core chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion.

### **Chapter 1: A critical Appraisal of Kerala's Rational modernity**

The first chapter offers a historical and cultural context for the conflicts that the melodramatic transgressions of mourning publics pose to the discourses of progressive rationality built around Kerala's public sphere. The core of this chapter, therefore, lies in the historical tension between melodrama and realism and its ideological underpinnings in the state's cultural politics. The role of the Left cultural interventions in building realism as a privileged mode of public culture is extensively analysed, particularly in relation to how its rigorous engagement with the spheres of the popular for populist consolidation manifested in realism's hegemonic position in the state's public discourses. This is analysed via the organised interventions of the Left to cultivate public rationality through many progressive literary movements, rational movements, mass campaigns for science education, the appropriation of various everyday social spaces as networks of public reason, etc., that manifest in the historical imagination of the state's public sphere

as a rational deliberative sphere. Subsequently, I delineate how the consolidation of a public sphere around the discursive intensity of public rationality, which anchors the state's public discourses in the progressive landscapes of a developmental modernity, legitimises the rejection of the cultural authenticity of melodrama in public culture. The chapter concludes by locating my arguments within the larger body of scholarship on the critiques of Kerala modernity, posing the scope of an affective reading of the state's popular culture.

## **Chapter 2: Mediatization via Mourning and Vice Versa: Television, Mass Grief and Liveness in Kerala**

The second chapter grapples with the corporeal and mediated intensities of mourning publics at celebrity funerals in Kerala, focusing on both in-person attendance and participation through TV and live-streaming platforms. It analyses the affective economy of grief, which is shaped by the live media coverage of emotional moments that converge into monumental spectacles. The chapter thus analyses how this economy, driven by the urgency of "liveness," has been materialised with the shift from traditional to new media over the past two decades. Analysing how these spectacles, which often embody the cultural manifestations of popular sovereignty, are crucial for understanding mass participation in Kerala, the chapter demonstrates how the monumentality of the mourning public contradicts Kerala's claims to rational exceptionalism. The chapter also maps out the distinctive ways in which the monumental eruption of grief is rationalised by a "civic sense".

## **Chapter 3: Mourning and *the occasions of excess*: melodramatic transgressions in contemporary Malayalam cinema**

The third chapter explores the melodramatic transgressions in mourning in contemporary Malayalam cinema through two film texts, *Ee. Ma. Yau* (Lijo Jose Pellissery 2017) and *Jana Gana Mana* (Dijo Jose Antony 2022). It analyses how the unruly expressions of grief, rage, and transgression of distinct mourning publics emerge as key sites for negotiating justice, proposing melodrama as a potent form of mourning. Foregrounding how melodramatic spectacles of collective mourning in these films serve as a discursive proxy for the bereaved's confrontation with institutional power, the chapter analyses how they disrupt Malayalam cinema's rejection of melodrama as an irrational remnant of

realism and the spatial configuration of inside and outside as respective realms for melodrama and realism. It also explores how they contest the structural and symbolic violence inherent in a public sphere dominated by realist aesthetics. In addition, the chapter situates these films within a recent corpus of Malayalam cinema marked by a new narrative milieu that engenders a significant aesthetic-political shift in its narrative concerns and industrial dynamics. These diegetic shifts, particularly the focus on community mobilisation in mourning, are engaged in relation to Malayalam cinemas' evolving engagements with various community groups and their socio-political and economic mobility. They are also interrogated in relation to the broader industrial and political shifts in Malayalam cinema, including the transition towards a dynamic streaming ecosystem, along with the ideological reconfigurations that address new political questions.

#### **Chapter 4: Memorialising Political Martyrdom: Visual Media and Party Politics in Kerala**

The fourth chapter critically engages with the ceremonial reverence accorded to victims of political violence in Kerala, which transforms them into martyrs through a mass-mediated cultural process. Analysing the visual culture of martyr discourses consolidated around the murders of the party workers of the Communist Parties, it examines how the commemorative rituals and symbolic mourning generated around their deaths transform martyrdom into a populist political spectacle. This chapter thus critically engages with how their martyr cults are imbued with the agency of vital political actors within the local cultural and political milieus and, therefore, contribute significant symbolic capital to the political identity of the Left in Kerala. The major focus of the chapter is on how the mass mourning and commemoration processes, where the revolutionary moment of Leftist politics and visual populism are intertwined via the cultural processes of martyrdom, respond to the state's claims of the rational mediation of public affect. The chapter also demonstrates how populist politics have the potential to be enabled, both symbolically and materially, through visually embodied sites forged by the commemorative rituals of collective mourning as well as the memorialising potential of martyr imagery.

## Conclusion

By drawing on insights from the visual culture of mass grief as exemplified by three distinct mourning publics, the concluding chapter highlights the importance of examining their transgressive potential beyond the conventional framework of the counterpublic sphere. Instead, I propose that they should be understood as *intimate publics* (Berlant 2009): communities united by visceral grief and shared loss, that operate beside formal political structures as juxta-political formations. The melodramatic spectacles of their affective intensities manifest as affective regimes, which are obliquely located to official politics, neither fully oppositional nor assimilable within the valences of a rationally modern public sphere in the cultural politics of the state. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that it not just manifests the porous boundary between melodrama and realism in Kerala's public culture, but also reveals an 'affective dialectic', where state power and public emotion mutually constitute and destabilise one another through perpetual negotiation. The chapter concludes the thesis by demonstrating how public displays of emotional outpouring, ritualised processions, and iconographic displays of public affect and melodramatic transgressions across these mourning sites function as shadow archives of the state's repressed sentimental excess, complicating the state's institutionalised tension between melodrama and realism.

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## **Introduction**

This thesis examines the tension between melodrama and rationality in the south Indian state of Kerala through the affective and mediated intensities of distinct mourning publics vis-à-vis their conflicts with the public sphere of the state. It has been analysed through the visual culture(s) of mass grief, as manifested in three cultural practices of mass grieving and their mediated cultural forms. In contrast to mourning held within familial or private circles, this thesis specifically addresses public forms of grieving, mediated by mass public attendance, media spectacles and visual practices of mass mediations. In particular, I analyse the affective publics across three vital sites of mass grieving in Kerala: (1) the performative spectacles of public affect at celebrity funerals, (2) affective solidarities in mourning in contemporary Malayalam cinema, and (3) the discursive construction of ‘martyrdom’ in public mourning/ commemorations of slain community Party workers. The term ‘mourning publics’ has been used in this study to denote a temporally bounded or enduring collective that forms around shared experiences of loss, triggered by death. The embodied sociality of mourning collectives in this study differs from the corporeal engagement with death that manifests via culturally codified rituals and their spatial practices. Grief is not engaged just as an individual experience but as an affective force that circulates through and reconstitutes social collectives, via the performative intensities of mourning publics. Such mourning publics may manifest through melodramatic displays of mass grief, where emotional responses to death are either materialized or mediated as political or cultural expressions of public affect and are often amplified into loci of mass mobilisation.

Grappling with the transformations of emotional outpouring to death into political theatres of mass grief, sites of subversive solidarities and mechanisms of ideological consolidations as elaborated respectively in the thesis chapters, I analyse how spectacles of their affective excess negotiates with Kerala’s self-fashioning as an exceptional paradigm of rational modernity. This narrative of exceptionalism is

predicated on its claim to have cultivated a distinctive rational public culture that purportedly transcends affective populist discourses from its mass cultural politics. However, the thesis demonstrates how this claim gets undermined by the visceral displays of the performative intensities of mourning publics and the populist sentiments surrounding them. Melodrama is foregrounded as a potent cultural, political and aesthetic force that ruptures the historical privileging of realism as the dominant mode of public address, legitimised through the trajectory of the state's public sphere upon the cultural capital of print-mediated rational deliberations.

The thesis, subsequently, examines how mourning death, as an affective practice, can be engaged as a discursive site to examine conflicts inherent in the dominant conceptualisations of the public sphere. Contemporary academic scholarship has increasingly explored mourning through a broader conceptual framework, analysing it as a symbolic practice associated with emotional responses to loss beyond grief occasioned by death (Caruth 1996; Sarkar 2009; Das 2007). Caruth (1996) defines trauma as an experience that is not fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence but that which emerges through repetition, memories, and acts of mourning. For her: “the story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life” (1996: 7). Combining trauma theory, film studies and south Asian cultural history, Sarkar (2009) traces how the trauma of the harrowing 1947 India- Pakistan partition is staged in Indian popular cinema. He delineates how nearly three decades of cinematic silence on partition in the 1950s and 1960s were followed by a sudden eruption of partition narratives in the subsequent two decades, engaging this shift as part of the traumatic responses engendered by the event itself.

Regardless, a substantial body of sociological, psychological, and anthropological theorisations of mourning remains anchored within the affective dynamics and embodied sociality of death-induced loss (Durkheim 1912; Freud 1917; Parry 1994). Durkheim (1912) engages the social implications of mourning in terms of a social obligation and a mechanism to reinforce social solidarity to the

social problem death has engendered. Freud (1917) engages mourning and melancholia as similar yet different responses to death. According to Freud, melancholia is related to an “object loss which is lost from consciousness”- the melancholic might know rationally what they have lost, but not what specifically was lost to them. In mourning, there is “nothing about the loss which is unconscious” (245).

This thesis examines grief observances as socially constituted, culturally and technologically mediated practices with significant underpinnings in the state’s cultural politics. The melodramatic valences in the three sites of mass grieving; celebrity funerals, cinema and political violence are not engaged merely as cultural counterpoints to the state’s claim of a rational mediation of public affect. Instead, their performative intensities are analysed to understand the diverse terrains melodrama inhabits in the public cultures of Kerala and how are they embodied in a range of visual materials on mass grief. These mourning publics are engaged also in relation to the mediatisation cultures consolidated around their affective dimensions and their implications for wider political and ideological mobilisations.

The thesis, thus, analyses distinct mourning publics to understand how spectacles of their affective excess rupture the performative topography of mourning, by manifesting as cultural and political expressions of mass affect and monumental spectacles of mass grief. It posits mourning as a contested site where the intractability of public emotional outpouring towards death and the visual practices of their mass mediations reveals the cultural legitimacy of melodrama. The valences of melodrama in mass affect in these sites become a site of academic enquiry for the conflict it poses to the public discourses shaped around the state’s celebrated spatial and political infrastructures of public rationality. These progressive rational discourses are mounted upon the trajectory of the state’s public sphere through a widespread reading culture, developmental politics focused on social justice, and the role of progressive cultural and rational movements’ in promoting a scientific progressive rationality. At the core of this rational self-positioning is the historical imagining of a public sphere informed by the cultural, political and aesthetic

discourses that reject melodrama. It positions melodrama as an aesthetic form marked by excess or a low cultural mode which undermines the state's rational, progressive self-image.

### **Is there a rational Malayali public?**

To understand why the performative intensities of these mourning publics hold a conflicting relationship with the discourses of public rationality in Kerala, it is necessary to understand what distinguishes melodrama from realism and to analyse the unique dynamics of melodrama's public expressions in the state. Melodrama and realism are twin cultural forms of capitalism, emerged almost simultaneously in Europe. However, melodrama is often dismissed as an inappropriate mode of expression or aesthetic form that fails to meet the standards of realism in specific historical contexts (Yoshimoto 1993: 104). The legitimacy of realism is underpinned by the notion that melodrama prioritises emotional affect, whereas realism is valued for its association with truth and its grounding in secular rationality. Melodrama is often portrayed in stark contrast to realism, viewing it as a rudimentary method of artistic mimesis, one that realism was believed to have left behind. As a result, melodrama as a genre is often identified within the performative traditions and reduced to a low form of art relying on simplified moralistic themes, high drama, and grand special effects. The terms realism and melodrama have, therefore, been employed in a distinctly evaluative manner, with realism representing rationality, order, pragmatism, and clarity, while melodrama is associated with emotion, excess, sentimentality, and grandiose gestures (Kelleter & Ruth Mayer 2007). As Postlewait (1996: 56) has noted, the contrast between melodrama and realism, where melodrama distorts while realism reflects, melodrama provides escapism while realism presents life, melodrama is conservative while realism is radical, and melodrama conveys ideologies (as false consciousness) while realism deconstructs them, remains a key aspect of their distinction.

Realism, on the other hand, is considered an aesthetic counterpart of modernity for reflecting the cultural, social, and intellectual shifts that defined the modern era. It has been predominantly because the discourses of realism aligned with

modernity's emphasis on rationality, scientific observation, and empirical truth.<sup>1</sup> For instance, cinematic realism gained significant traction in the post-World War II period, particularly in countries like Italy and Germany, as they sought to reconstruct their national identities after the devastation of the war. As exemplified by the Italian Neorealist movement, which focused on the harsh socioeconomic conditions of post-war society and similar trends in other countries, cinema was used to create a national identity through the realist aesthetics employed to portray social realities. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) asserts that realism, as the dominant mode of representation for the nation-state, is essential for protecting rights, which he refers to as the "realist prose of rights." He argues that historians and social scientists have a responsibility to depict the world in a manner that is both realist and secular.<sup>2</sup>

Biswas (2022) identifies realism as a new value that emerged alongside the secularisation of the world under capitalism. The idea of realism, according to him, presupposes a particular form of aesthetic experience that asserts a binding relationship to the real itself. He argues that the originality of the concept of realism lies in its dual claim to both cognitive and aesthetic validity. Prasad (2001) argues that a key reason Indian cultural productions are often aligned with melodramatic traditions, unlike their Western counterparts, lies in their historical situatedness within a cultural space that has not privileged heightened verisimilitude as an aesthetic ideal. This is also very much shaped by the melodramatic nature of social existence in South Asian countries. Vasudevan (2011) observes that a particularly influential discourse on realism has been formed through the concept of the classical realist text. The high cultural and literary value attributed to realism as both an aesthetic and cultural mode emanates from its foundations in classical literary works. Whereas the dichotomy between melodrama and realism in Malayalam literary and aesthetic traditions is grounded in the cultural dominance of textuality over oral traditions. This is exemplified by how the social realist tradition draws on the literary

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<sup>1</sup> This legitimacy is derived predominantly from realist art and literature, often engaged with themes like poverty, class struggle, and the alienation caused by capitalism, challenging traditional values and critiquing social and political power structures.

<sup>2</sup> By "realist", he refers to an understanding of the world as something concrete and capable of being described through prose .

works of canonical Malayalam writers, whose writings are esteemed for their enduring literary and aesthetic merit. The influence of this literary tradition is evident in the development of the social realist tradition in Malayalam cinema and theatre, which has been shaped by the legacy of the progressive literary movement.

In contrast, melodrama is frequently characterised negatively, often regarded as a surplus or excess that realism fails to assimilate (Prasad 2001). It is viewed as an affective economy of the popular or mass culture, commonly associated with low artistic and cultural aesthetics. However, melodrama's trajectory across time and space reveals its adaptation by various cultural formations. Prasad (2001) observes how different societies have embraced melodrama, infusing it with their own performance traditions, thereby imbuing the form with a distinctly national identity. In Western discussions of film melodrama, the emphasis has typically been on the genre of women's melodrama, which was consistently marked by a certain compromise with realism. Vasudevan (2000) explores melodrama as a dominant cinematic form, locating it within the broader political and cultural changes of postcolonial India. He views melodrama as both a narrative structure and an aesthetic form that bridges the public and private, as well as the personal and political spheres. He also illustrates how Indian cinema's focus on spectacle and emotional excess cultivates a collective form of spectatorship, uniting audiences through shared cultural values and social aspirations.

Willemsen emphasizes the geopolitical dimensions of melodrama in the Cold War context, effectively stating that 'melodramas are dramas of modernisation, in which socio-historical forces are reduced to their impact on what powerful blocks choose to define as traditional kinship relations and are valued accordingly' (1994:97). Similarly, discussions of melodrama in the Asian context (Dissanayake 1993) have always pointed out the melodramatic nature of social existence in Asian countries. Yoshimoto argues that melodrama is a socio-historical phenomenon, "not merely a literary or cinematic genre, but an ideologeme that supports the social formation of post-war Japan" (1993: 106–107). Similarly, Russell suggests that "national identity in Japan has a particularly melodramatic structure" (1993: 143). Prasad (2001) argues that the global history of melodrama is also a reflection of the

geopolitical realities of the contemporary world. All these reveal the ideological functioning of melodrama in many South Asian countries, as in the case of the moral universe of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Wang 1993), melodrama as an ideologeme supporting the social formation of post-war Japan (MitSuhiro 1993) and so on. What is fundamental to these enquiries is also a key scholarly interest in engaging melodrama's cultural adaptations in diverse cultural milieus and national traditions, as a site for exploring certain overlooked aspects of the relation between aesthetics and politics.

The tension melodrama has posed to the ideological trajectory of the state's modernity and its cultural politics is rooted in the historical imagining of the state's public sphere as a domain of public rationality. The rejection of the cultural authenticity of melodrama as popular culture is reflected primarily in the dismissal of the cultural politics surrounding star worship and its manifestations within melodramatic political contexts. Consequently, the dynamics of star-fan relationships, often seen as emblematic of the performative populism inherent in South Indian political structures (Prasad 2014), are interpreted through the realist lens, which views these practices as melodramatic excess associated with mass participation in South India. These discourses are shaped by the public discourses on the trajectory of the state's public sphere through a literary and cultural modernity. Many other formerly colonised Indian states have developed their own contested colonial modernities, although fractured by the teleologies of progress they sought to embody (Chatterjee 1993; Pandian 2002). However, Kerala's experience has been uniquely canonised as an exceptional paradigm, obscuring its internal contradictions and the contested realities underlying its self-fashioned exceptionalism (Devika 2010, 2012; Mohan 2015). Scholarly discourses concerning the state's socio-political exceptionalism predominantly emerge from analyses of its historically distinctive public sphere, which is theorised as constituted through the state's unique trajectory of modernity (Jeffrey 1992; Harikrishnan 2022). Kerala modernity is thus widely used as a conceptual category to encapsulate the region's unique historical engagement with modernisation processes, resulting in socio-political formations distinguished by their underpinnings in progressive rationalism. This trajectory is

characterised by a progressive socio-political formation marked by 1) notable achievements in social indicators and human development metrics, also identified as the Kerala development model 2) the role of mass mobilisations led by the Left political parties and community reform movements that resulted in the implementation of progressive welfare policies, redistribution of resources, equal access to social spaces and so on. It is subsequently hailed as a welfare-driven paradigm, shaped predominantly by the Left-led cultural and political interventions prioritising social justice.

It is vital to acknowledge that the tension with melodramatic public cultures is shaped by the formation of the state's public sphere, mythologised as emerging exclusively through deliberative rationality, print capitalism, and institutionalised networks of public reason. These narratives of exceptionalism are also anchored within the trajectory of state formation, mass politics, and the rational self-fashioning of the public sphere, among others. Kerala's political modernity is characterised by historically sedimented civic rationalism, political culture informed by institutionalised leftist mobilisations and the public sphere shaped by social reform movements (Jeffrey 1992, Menon 2016), contrary to the political and cultural conflicts that characterised state formation in other South Indian states.<sup>3</sup> This trajectory is principally attributed to the strategic deployment of linguistic cohesion as political capital to enable radical redistributive reforms, including land redistribution, literacy campaigns, and decentralised planning, as opposed to mobilising language primarily as an affective ideological force for political consolidation in the other south Indian states (Bate 2021). Scholars argue that the Malayalam language served less as an instrument of ethnic nationalism and more as a medium for class solidarity, enabling the institutionalisation of a rationalist-

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<sup>3</sup> The discourse of Kerala's socio-political distinctiveness emerged right from the linguistic reorganisation of 1956, which peacefully integrated the Malayalam-speaking territories of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar into a unified political entity. This peaceful integration is frequently contrasted with the violent struggles that marked demands for statehood based on linguistic lines in other South Indian states. For instance, the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953 was preceded by the martyrdom of Potti Sriramulu after a prolonged fast, while Tamil Nadu witnessed aggressive protests against the imposition of Hindi, reflecting deeper linguistic tensions. In contrast, Kerala's transition was marked by consensus based on a common Malayali cultural identity, reinforcing its reputation for progressive politics and social cohesion.

socialist public sphere under leftist hegemony in Kerala (Mannathukaran 2016; Devika 2007). Unlike the dominance of ethnic populism and caste patronage in other southern states, Kerala's modern political formation is predicated upon welfare systems and state-promoted scientific rationalism.

The complementary relationship between aesthetic and political projects across Indian film industries is analogically reflected in the privileging of realism as the dominant mode of cultural discourse, particularly in the context of Malayalam cinema. The ideological contention between melodrama and realism manifests in the projection of social realism as the aesthetic corollary of the state's developmental modernity (Radhakrishnan 2012, Edachira 2020), demarcating its popular culture from the star power and melodramatic tendencies assembled within the cultural politics of peninsular India (Prasad 2014; Pandian 2002; Srinivas 2009). The discursive construction of the rational Malayali subject is thus undertaken by strategically contrasting it with the linguistic sub-nationalism and ethnic populism that govern the public cultures of neighbouring states. This condescension operates through a dual rejection: 1) of linguistic nationalism as an affective infrastructure (Mitchell 2009) for populist mobilisation; 2) of the hyper-visible cine-political networks that characterise South Indian states wherein fandom (expressed through deification rituals, monumental funeral processions and grievance performatives) is transformed into para-sovereign political power (Srinivas 2002, 2009). Kerala's narratives of exceptionalism actively distance public culture from these affective formations and position it as a deliberative space devoid of such "irrational" articulations, whether through the conspicuous absence of star-driven political mobilisation, where cinematic charisma fails to translate into electoral power. These discursive manoeuvres systematically dismiss the generative potential of melodramatic cultural expressions that blur spectacle with sovereignty, reinforcing instead Kerala's self-image as a space of bureaucratic rationality over affective political governance.

Yet, its self-fashioning as a rational modernity remains tethered predominantly to the trajectory of its public sphere, manifested through networks of reading publics formed around newspapers, literary societies, public libraries and

institutionalised campaigns for mass literacy and scientific rational education. These progressive cultural formations, celebrated as infrastructures of public reason, have collectively shaped the progressive Malayali citizen- subject (Varughese 2017; Kumar 2019). Kerala's privileging of realism is thus predicated on the hegemony of textually mediated rational-critical deliberations materialised through vibrant reading publics organised around newspapers, print literature and the infrastructural networks of public rationality. These institutions constitute the structural core of the state's public sphere and reflect the cultural internalisation of reading as a habitual praxis within Malayali modernity (Varughese 2017). The textual orientation of Kerala's cultural habitus has subsequently shaped the epistemological privileging of realism as the hegemonic aesthetics in the state's cultural productions. The aesthetic conventions of popular Malayalam cinema thus operate as a remediation of the enduring realist tradition in Malayalam literature, creating a continuum between print and visual cultures. Together, these cultural configurations produce a culturalpolitical mode of Malayali self-fashioning, anchored within a realist habitus that informs political imaginaries in Kerala's public sphere.

However, the developmentalist teleology underpinning Kerala modernity, premised on the Left-led redistributive politics and universal narratives of social mobility, faced major scholarly contestations by the 1980s through what came to be known as the 'critiques of Kerala modernity' (Cleetus 2015; Mohan 2015; Devika 2007). These counter-narratives expose the fundamental contradictions masked by the dominant developmental narrative: the persistence of caste hierarchies within its radical democratic claims, the state's strategic erasure of its Gulf-dependent informal economy, and the paradox of high social indicators existing with industrial stagnation and chronic unemployment, among others. My research examines how Kerala's discourse of rational exceptionalism, legitimised through a print-mediated public sphere, negotiates with affective undercurrents and structural exclusions that equally weigh onto its contested public culture. To explore this, I focus on melodramatic emotional outpourings, particularly mass grief as a trope through which to interrogate the negotiations of Kerala's public sphere with spectacles of public affect. The public discourses anchored within the construct of the 'Malayali

rational public' function as informal regulatory regimes that institutionalise realist discourse as the legitimate mode of civic engagement while pathologising, yet never fully containing, the insurgent potential of melodramatic mass affect. This thesis, thus, offers an affective critique of Kerala modernity, contesting the state's ideological privileging of a rationalist public sphere, a paradigm that seeks to transcend, yet remains inextricably entangled with melodramatic mobilisations of public affect it tries to marginalise.

### **Mourning as melodrama?**

How does this trajectory of the public sphere as a 'rational' deliberative space shape civic engagement, particularly when citizens turn to melodrama as a cultural form of grieving? How does the state of Kerala engage in uneasy negotiations with the melodramatic excess at mourning sites, where the visceral presence of the dead body temporarily legitimises the melodramatic transgression by the mourners' emotional outpouring? I will examine how melodrama mediates these tensions and negotiations by analysing two key events. Kerala's management of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a globally recognised exemplar of effective crisis response, distinguished by its scientific approach, decentralised public health infrastructure, and remarkable civic cooperation. The state's success was widely attributed to its unique socio-political ecosystem shaped by decades of investment in primary healthcare, a tradition of participatory local governance, and high literacy rates and their manifestations in public rationality (Rahim & Chacko 2020). The Kerala model was predicated on a rigorously coordinated strategy of early testing, aggressive contact tracing, and strict enforcement of public health protocols, facilitated by an engaged citizenry demonstrating uncommon compliance with masking, mobility restrictions, and other containment measures. This compliance was frequently framed in public discourse as evidence of a distinctive Malayali civic consciousness that privileged rationality over emotional affect. However, the state's stringent pandemic regulations, including prohibitions on funeral gatherings, mandates for rapid burials, and restrictions on final rites, effectively transferred the affective labour of grief from the communal sphere to the private domain. While it forced the bereaved individuals to endure grief in isolation, the visceral intensities of the emotional

responses of the mourners never meaningfully challenged Kerala's rational-bureaucratic order. Moreover, the state's regulatory frameworks contained the affective disruptions, reinforcing its technocratic efficiency.<sup>4</sup> The pandemic's emotional toll subsequently remained a privatised phenomenon, paradoxically *enhancing* the state's rationalist credentials. All these enabled Kerala's public sphere to affirm its capacity to subordinate emotional valences to scientific crisis management, further legitimising its model of enduring civic rationality. The crisis thus became a testament also to the state's ability to contain and manage unruly affect within frameworks of public reason.

Years later, in another incident, the death of Neyyattinkara Gopan Swamy (2025), a self-proclaimed spiritual guru, sparked huge controversy in the state as his sons enshrined his body in a concrete burial chamber in the Thiruvananthapuram district (John 2025). This act was justified through claims that he had entered samadhi – a yogic state of meditative transcendence. His family also elected a flex board outside their house that declared the attainment of his 'samadhi'- the first official claim that alerted local residents. Following public complaints, police intervened to dismantle a makeshift tomb constructed on site and exhumed the body for police investigation, triggering vehement protests from the family (Philip 2025). Gopan's wife and sons fiercely resisted the tomb's demolition and exhumation, framing the event as a transcendental miracle- a claim that was amplified into a melodramatic spectacle through live broadcasts on Malayalam news channels and viral social media circulation. The controversy drew hundreds of devotees to the site, many hailing it as a supernatural phenomenon. The Kerala police and district administration's demolition of the burial crypt initially appeared as an assertion of bureaucratic rationality and legal authority. However, the state's enforcement efforts rapidly deteriorated when confronted with organised protests from Hindu right-wing groups, whose mobilisation effectively pressured authorities into retreat. The state apparatus's silent retraction of charges and implicit acceptance of Gopan Swamy's re-enshrinement exposed the fragility of Kerala's rational modernity claims when

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<sup>4</sup> However, the initial celebration of Kerala's successful COVID-19 response proved premature, as the state soon encountered a devastating second wave of infections. This new surge exposed potential gaps in its much-lauded model of 'public action,' raising questions about underlying vulnerabilities in its approach.

confronting popular religiosity. The incident also laid bare the inherent contradiction in Kerala's progressive project as its institutional commitment to scientific temper is routinely overridden by the political imperatives of majoritarian sentiments and electoral pragmatism.

Such incidents often reveal the state's conflicting relationship with melodramatic modes of public culture, a tension rooted in its historical burden in sanitising the public sphere against affective excess. Despite the state's commitment to rationalist order, it is persistently disrupted by eruptions of mass mourning into the public sphere. In this thesis, the term *state* has been used differently in different context. It refers to Kerala as a geographic territory and a cultural entity while explaining trajectory of its public sphere. But, throughout the thesis, I have also used the term to refer to specific institutions of state, employed in governing mass participation, specifically the involvement of police, democratic structures and other regulatory frameworks in disciplining the public's behaviors in sites of mass grief. In the chapter on celebrity funerals, the term primarily denotes the role of the police in managing large public gatherings, the conferral of state honours, the use of state symbols, such as Kerala State Transport buses as funeral corteges and the state-owned civil halls as venues for funeral assemblies. In the chapter on cinema, state is used to refer to the governmental actions and public policies to address the social and political marginalization of a lower caste fishing community and the interventions of police and court room proceedings.

Similar to the aforementioned cases, I will demonstrate how the performative intensities of mass grief at celebrity funerals, political martyrdoms, and cinema are negotiated and coopted by various political, cultural and media establishments of the state and why do they plug in this process. The spectacles of their affective excess and their mass mediated forms are pivotal in understanding mass grieving as a melodramatic modality of public engagement, where the legitimacy of melodrama in mass displays of public affect contingently negotiate the rational enclosures of the public sphere. By analysing mourning through melodrama, as both a cultural form and a political force, the thesis proves how such performances underscore their

contested relationship with the public sphere and the melodramatic underpinnings of its public cultures of mass participation.

Thus, I show how in the context of theatricalized grief, and dissolution of private-public boundaries of the rational mediation of public affect, melodrama operates as juxta political formations beneath/close to the formal politics in Kerala. I have drawn the term juxtapolitical from Lauren Berlant (2009) who uses the phrase to refer to the emotional or sentimental narratives that operate adjacent to, or underneath formal organized politics. She has employed the term to denote space, behaviours or “intimate publics that exist in close proximity to but are not explicitly part of, traditional formal politics but articulated via its idioms. For Berlant, intimate publics are thus juxtapolitical that thrive in close proximity to the political even as they deny connection to political movements or the conflicts, antagonism and frictions entailed in them. The intimate public for Berlant operates through specific genres such as melodrama, romance and personal confessions that make the world feel “personal” while managing anxieties about social change. My use of the term is more on how the affective excess in mourning that is rationalised or co-opted by various state and non-state actors unravel as juxtapolitical formations. The melodramatic narratives and affective spectacles that forms the structural core of these sites not just shows how the melodramatic undercurrents sit in close proximity to the formal political structures in Kerala but how do they shape the cultural politics of the state. Thus, the ways in which melodrama acquires massive legitimacy as juxtapolitical formations of mass affect in the cultural practices of mass grieving and the unique political, cultural and technological context which enables the state’s peculiar negotiations with melodrama forms the crux of the study.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review is organised in two sections around two distinct thematic axes: the public sphere and mourning. My attempt here is to generate a qualitative sense of the underpinnings of the conflict between reason and emotion, pervasive in the conceptualisations of the public sphere, as well as the scholarship on the embodied sociality of mourning. In addition to examining how the affective residues of

mourning publics conflict with the realist claims of the public sphere in Kerala, it is essential to trace a brief genealogy of the longstanding tension between reason and melodrama that has historically influenced the theorisation of the public sphere in a historical and comparative perspective. It offers a framework for analysing how counter-public spheres, formed in resistance to the universalist teleologies of modernity, take shape in post-colonial contexts like India, particularly through media-driven vernacular public spheres. Such a historical perspective also allows for a culturally and historically grounded understanding of how realism emerged as a dominant mode of cultural expression in Kerala, often coming into conflict with melodrama within the state's unique cultural politics.

### ***Public Sphere***

While the public sphere's decisive role in modern democratic politics is well established, its conceptualisations are shaped by an underlying tension between reason and affect. In Habermas's (1991) classic formulation of the public sphere, the potential to cultivate rational-critical debates among citizens is defined as its core feature. He notes:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (*öffentliches Rasonnement*) (1991: 27).

Public sphere was thus perceived as a social space enabling the public to create consensus on matters of collective interest through open discussions. Outlining the structural transition of the public sphere in early modern Europe through the rise of a bourgeois public sphere, he finds rational deliberation as fundamental to its political agency in mediating between society and the state. While

this thesis engages in a critical reading of the discursive rationality defining the public sphere, Habermas's analysis of the bourgeois public sphere, formed around coffee houses, salons, and literary societies, finds resonance in the formation of Kerala's public sphere, where literary publics and reading cultures are argued to have been central to the region's trajectory of modernity. Habermas identifies the informal deliberations within the public sphere as the foundational logic of his deliberative democratic model (Fraser 1962). A parallel dynamic could be drawn from the mass cultural interventions in appropriating the everyday social spaces as sites of rational deliberation in Kerala, projecting these spaces as social networks that entrench public rationality.

Habermas's idealisation of the public sphere as a domain of rational-critical deliberation has been challenged for its exclusionary dynamics, pointing out how the liberal framework of the public sphere presupposes the bracketing of social inequalities (Fraser 1990; Warner 2002). These criticisms posit that the public sphere privileges the notion of political equality by obscuring material asymmetries of power and access. Warner (2002) argues that the public sphere operates as a contested space of social production and differences. He argues that:

A counter public maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness. Friction against the dominant public forces the poetic-expressive character of counterpublic discourse to become salient to consciousness (2002: 39)

Warner exposes its exclusionary dimensions, analysing how its privileging of rational discourses underpins gender, racial and sexual hierarchies, ultimately

leading to the rise of counter public spheres. For Warner, the public sphere is not a pre-existing sphere of rational deliberation but a spontaneous collective that self-organises through textual circulation and the embodied power of mediated communication.

Fraser (1990)'s rejection of the ideal of a singular public sphere is also based on its constitutive exclusions, mostly referring to women and the non-proprietary male working class. She points out:

Moreover, the problem is not only that Habermas idealizes the liberal public sphere but also that he fails to examine other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres. Or rather, it is precisely because he fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere. Mary Ryan documents the variety of ways in which nineteenth century North American women of various classes and ethnicities constructed access routes to public political life, even despite their exclusion from the official public sphere. In the case of elite bourgeois women, this involved building a counter-civil society of alternative woman-only voluntary associations, including philanthropic and moral reform societies; in some respects, these associations aped the all-male societies built by these women's fathers and grandfathers; yet in other respects the women were innovating, since they creatively used the heretofore quintessentially "private" idioms of domesticity and motherhood precisely as springboards for public activity. Meanwhile, for some less privileged women, access to public life came through participation in supporting roles in male-dominated working-class protest activities. Still other women found public outlets in street protests and parades. Finally, women's rights advocates publicly contested both women's exclusion from the official public sphere and the privatization of gender politics (1990: 61).

Following this, her term subaltern counter publics proposes a pluralistic model of multiple, antagonistic publics where marginalised communities contest

dominant narratives, cultivate oppositional epistemologies, and uphold alternative social identities. Public sphere is thus engaged not as “spaces of zero-degree culture”; they outline and frame a specific cultural setting, where some cultural and political expressions are deemed appropriate and others are not (1999: 120). Her critique of the bourgeois public sphere as an apparatus for hegemonic formation is mainly rooted in its implications in political domination. Drawing on this trajectory, one could find that Kerala’s public sphere is similarly constituted through a text-based deliberative paradigm, whose realist discursive formations ultimately crystallised into the Left’s political and cultural hegemony within the state. Fraser (1990) argues that political domination operates through manufactured consent, forged by discursive regimes that naturalise the existing order as "common sense". It provides a critical framework for analysing how Kerala’s Left political tradition consolidated narratives of progressive rationality via the mass cultural mediums such as theatre and cinema, and the concerted efforts to cultivate a Left common sense as the locus of secular rationality in the state.

Both Fraser and Warner’s theorisations, which frame the public sphere as a space of conflictual and antagonistic publics, offer a useful analytical framework to position my examination of mourning publics as affective sites that rupture the discourses of rational modernity embedded in Kerala’s public sphere. Warner’s conceptualisation of publics as discursively constituted formations thus lends itself to theorising the emergence of affective publics in the mourning sites, which are key to my analysis. These sites operate as social spaces where performative spectacles of mass grief, melodramatic modes of address, and visceral expressions of embodied solidarities lead to the formation of affective publics that disrupt the rational enclosures of Kerala’s public sphere.

In conjunction, I foreground the constitutive tension between reason and emotion, one of the central fault lines in conceptualising the public sphere, as a critical framework for my analysis. The term ‘affect’, or ‘affectivity’ as per Spinoza, denotes the changes in a body’s power of action. He writes, “I understand affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished”

(1994:154). For Deleuze, affect at its core is a relational concept: “to increase one’s power of acting, one must enter into a complementary relation with something external to oneself” (1998: 49-50). Following Spinoza’s conception of affect as rooted in *relational encounters* between bodies and their external milieu, I use the term to describe bodily and emotional intensities that move through assemblages of bodies, discourses, and materialities vis-à-vis the relation between the public and the private. In this framework, the affective intensities that animate mourning sites circulate across social collectives, giving rise to new affective publics constituted through the mediated publicness of shared grief and embodied solidarity.

As a derivative, Sara Ahmed analyses the sociality of emotions as feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation while materially shaping and govern public life (2004:9). For her, “emotions are not private matters that simply belong to individuals” (2004: 117) but social and political forces circulating through bodies, discourses, and institutions. Delineating the term 'affective economies,' Ahmed analyses emotions in embodiment and language, showing how fear, disgust, shame and love work as different kinds of orientations towards objects and others, which shape individual as well as collective bodies. Her analysis of the spatial politics of fear and the way fear restricts the mobility of some and extends the mobility of others, demonstrates how affective logics fundamentally structure the public sphere. She notes, “ responses to terrorism work as ‘an economy of fear’, in which the figure of the terrorist gets associated with some bodies (and not others), at the same time as the terrorist ‘could be’ anyone or everywhere” ( 2004:16)

Mazarella’s works (2013, 2017) examine the significance of mass affect in understanding contemporary public cultures. In an analysis of Indian film censorship, he (2013) brings out the distinct dynamics of political and cultural sovereignty in mass-mediated societies with a particular emphasis on mass affect. His engagements with the affective experiences of the crowd’s emotions and social communication, illuminating the implications of affect for public discourses, inform my enquiries on the visceral negotiations of mourning publics with public culture.

However, scholarship on the public sphere in the Indian context has focused primarily on how caste hierarchies, religious identities, and vernacular media cultures have structured alternative and fragmented public spheres, challenging the notion of a homogeneous public sphere (Chatterjee 2020, 2004; Orsini 2002; Rajagopal 2001). Chatterjee (2020) explores colonial India's fragmented public sphere, where entrenched hierarchies of caste, gender, and language compelled marginalised communities to construct oppositional and decentralised publics. He (2004) argues that the rise of identity-based political movements in postcolonial societies emerges in response to the bio-political regimes employed for governmental administration. For him, the subaltern political agency often operates through informal and unconventional channels that circumvent formal state institutions and civil society structures, which he locates in the regional dynamics of populist mobilisation. Drawing on this, he defines civil society (2004) as a domain of the propertied elites engaging in normative rational debates against political society, where subaltern populations negotiate rights through informal means. He argues that political society emerges as a distinct domain in postcolonial democracies where subaltern groups negotiate welfare, rights, and agency through informal mechanisms that operate beyond the exclusionary boundaries of civil society. These negotiations unfold outside the normative liberal public sphere, generating alternative political imaginaries rooted in patronage networks, populist mobilisations, and tactical engagements with state power. His body of work on the unruly, embodied struggles of marginalised communities, manifested through the formation of political societies, offers a broader theoretical foundation for developing an affective critique of modernity and the public sphere.

However, a considerable body of literature focuses on the role of Vernacular media ecologies, particularly print media, in constituting regional public spheres in India (Orsini 2002; Jeffrey 2000; Varughese 2017). Orsini's *The Hindi Public Sphere* (2002) traces the role of standardised Hindi in constructing a regional Hindi public sphere in early twentieth-century North India. Whereas Jeffrey's *India's Newspaper Revolution* (2000) examines how the late twentieth-century surge in vernacular newspapers—propelled by market forces such as affordable printing technology,

rising literacy rates, and increased advertising revenue—contributed to a more inclusive public sphere, facilitating grassroots political mobilisation by empowering regional audiences. Media democratization has significantly enabled the marginalised groups across regional public spheres to bypass exclusionary civil society institutions and assert agency through alternative discursive spaces.

Whereas Rajagopal (2001) explores the mobilisation of Hindu nationalism through the state-controlled broadcast of the Hindu epic Ramayana in serialised form on Door darshan. He points out how these televised religious spectacles facilitated the creation of majoritarian Hindu publics, culminating in the Hindu nationalist campaign centred on the symbol of Lord Ram. Rajagopal argues that the serial's populist appeal and ritualised viewership generated a new mode of political belongingness under a homogenised Hindu identity. The monograph's analysis of the television's role in Hindu nationalist mobilisation primarily hinges on the affective consolidation of a Hindu Public sphere through televisual spectacle, evading print media that had previously dominated political communication.

Although situated in a different historical, political, and cultural context, a major corpus of academic inquiries into the public sphere in South India has emphasized the role of affective mobilizations, particularly those centred on linguistic sub-nationalism and ethnic populism, as key to understanding the regional political formations and identity politics (Prasad 2014; Srinivas 2009; Pandian 1992; Mitchell 2009). These literatures show that visual culture, especially the melodramatic aesthetics of popular cinema, has been widely employed for mass mobilisation in the south Indian states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Scholars such as Prasad (2014), Pandian (1992) and Srinivas map this affective mobilisation in the phenomenon of cine-politics, through which the affective economies of cinema, such as charismatic stardom, melodramatic narratives and devotional fan cultures are effectively converted into political power.

Prasad (2014) demonstrates how South Indian film stars leveraged their screen personas into political power through melodramatic performances that

translate their cinematic personas into quasi-divine figures. These cine-political assemblages fundamentally reconfigured the Tamil and Telugu public spheres by merging cinematic spectacle with electoral processes, creating a populist paradigm where fan bhakti (devotional fandom) elevated stars beyond their cinematic roles into political sovereigns. This synthesis of spectatorial identification and political power, Prasad contends, generated virtual political sovereignty for the marginalised population as surrogate political existence in the wake of regionalist assertions of linguistic nationalism posed by South Indian states through the cultural apparatus of cinema.

Srinivas (2009) examines the South Indian “megastars” phenomenon and its attendant fan cultures as key sites where cinematic affect transforms into political power. His work demonstrates how star devotional activities organised around fan clubs, which emanate from the star veneration/ fan bhakti function as parallel civil societies.<sup>5</sup> Analysing the fan activities around Telugu and Tamil cinema, Srinivas reveals how these affective networks mobilise subaltern communities, offering them alternative avenues of political participation, while often reinforcing patriarchal and caste hierarchies. His analysis critiques the Habermasian framework of the public sphere by showing how mass-mediated star charisma generates populist legitimacy that bypasses institutional politics and creates a distinct mode of democratic engagement rooted in spectacles rather than rational discourses.

Adding to this body of academic scholarship, Pandian's *The Image Trap* (1992) examines how the Dravidian movement, especially M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), constructed a strong populist political image harnessing Tamil cinema's melodramatic aesthetics – hyperbolic emotionality, moral binaries, and heroic victim narratives. He demonstrates how film devices, such as costuming, dialogue delivery and emotional scenes, manifested as tools of mass mobilisation, transcending caste

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<sup>5</sup> Fan culture in South India is characterised by extravagant displays, particularly in the public demonstrations of adulation during superstar film releases. These fan activities, expressions of intense cinephilia, are performed in the name of the star, ostensibly to promote and elevate his status. Unlike Kerala, the growth of fan activity has clear parallels in the expansion of mass politics in the other Southern States.

and literacy barriers, thereby translating MGR's on-screen persona into political sovereignty. Pandian reveals how this cinematic politics cultivated an affective infrastructure where star worship and democratic participation became indistinguishable as theatrical spectacles of mass devotion. Crucially, this phenomenon turned out to be an archetype of spectacular politics in South India, gaining notable legitimacy to emotional excess in political communication.

Much on similar lines, Mitchell's (2009) *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India* shows how linguistic nationalism was engaged as an affective infrastructure, examining the intersection of linguistic identity, affective mobilisation, and political power. She delineates how language was adopted as an object of profound emotional attachment in shaping collective identity and resistance, culminating in acts of self-sacrifice for the formation of the state on a linguistic basis in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. She demonstrates how anti-colonial and anti-Hindi movements in South India resulted in language being engaged as a maternal entity under threat, which manifested in the mobilisation of bodily devotion through fasts, protests, and suicides (as evident in Potti Sriramulu's fast-to-death for Andhra state formation). Mitchell points out how these acts were rooted in a regional affective infrastructure where language, tied to caste and cultural identity, became a visceral site of political resistance and linguistic sub-nationalism. Similarly, the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu instrumentalised linguistic nationalism through a melodramatic affinity to language, transforming Tamil into both a weapon against Brahminical/Hindi hegemony and a medium for populist mobilisation. DMK's political speeches and cultural productions also projected language as a corporeal entity which requires to be protected and a cultural identity that unifies subaltern groups through shared linguistic pride (Mitchell 2009).

Kerala's linguistic politics diverged from this melodramatic trajectory observed elsewhere in South India, particularly as it is often credited with evading melodramatic populism. Instead, the linguistic unification of Kerala was primarily facilitated through the standardisation of the Malayalam language, a process closely tied to the rise of print culture, which enabled the disparate Malayalam-speaking

communities to be imagined as part of a homogeneous Malayali public sphere. The print media and the standardisation of the Malayalam language have played a crucial role in unifying the three Malayalam-speaking regions – Madras, Kochi and Travancore – into modern Kerala, as shown by Devika (2012). Kerala's dynamic print and literary culture has been the subject of substantial scholarship, particularly for its role in shaping the region's modernity and fostering a progressive rationality within the public sphere (Jeffrey 2009; Arunima 2006). In his essay *Testing Concepts about Print Newspapers and Politics: Kerala, India,* Jeffrey critically assesses the impact of print consumption on Kerala's social life and politics. The expansion of printing and publishing ventures in the region fostered a popular culture of reading, positioning the emerging reading publics at the heart of Kerala's progressive self-image.

Any critical inquiry into Kerala's public sphere must account for its media generated public spheres. The formation of public spheres or counter publics around print cultures has been instrumental in shaping Kerala's distinct socio-political modernity (ChandraBose 2021; Scaria 2024; Devika 2012; Varughese 2017). ChandraBose (2021) illustrates how print media played a pivotal role in shaping Malayali consciousness around modernity and the idea of the nation-state. He highlights how colonial-era print culture served as a key site where British colonial governance, indigenous spiritual movements, and Western Christian missionary efforts constitutively shaped Kerala's modernity. Scaria (2024) examines the religious dimensions of print modernity by mapping the Catholic Church's engagement with print technology in nineteenth-century Kerala. He explores how the Church not only embraced the printing press as an agent of modernity but also mobilised it to enable the rise of Catholic print capitalism against the growing influence of Protestantism in the region.

Varughese (2017) argues that the historical trajectory of reading practices among Malayalees offers critical insights into the cultural and ideological forces that shaped Kerala's dynamic public sphere. Tracing the history of reading patterns in Kerala, he notes that reading in Kerala was cultivated as a collective practice right

from the colonial period, facilitated by spaces such as Christian mission compounds, men's clubs, public libraries, tea shops, and other communal gathering sites. He delineates a decisive shift from reading as a collective, politically engaged, and aesthetic activity to a more individualised habit with the widespread adoption of newspaper subscriptions following the newspaper revolution in the 1970s. As he notes, this is manifested in most of the households in Kerala regularly accessing newspapers, signaling a profound change in the media consumption patterns (Varughese 2017). Thereafter, newspaper reading turned out to be the primary form of political engagement for most of the Malayalees, which later manifested in culturally establishing reading as a political act. Hence, as Varughese notes, this led to the political public sphere in Kerala being organised around regional newspapers, with the political public of the state emerging primarily as a newspaper-reading public by the 1980s. This is further illustrated in Harikrishnan's (2022) work on the spatial history of modernity in Kerala, explored through social spaces and the public sphere. He argues that examining these spaces, ranging from literary associations and reading rooms to public clubs and markets, reveals how alternative modernities were materialised through everyday social spaces. He analyses how these sites evolved into cosmopolitan social arenas where marginalised communities repurposed physical infrastructures such as roads, tea shops, and festival grounds to assert citizenship claims, thereby disrupting upper-caste norms regulating access to social space.

Varughese's monograph, *Contested Knowledge: Science, Media and Democracy in Kerala* (2017), examines the public deliberation of science within the context of risk politics, providing a valuable framework for my analysis of the shifting nature of media-generated public spheres. He argues that Kerala offers an interesting social context to look at mediated public deliberation of science in a nonwestern context for four main reasons. He notes:

First, the region has a long history of the domestication of science, shaped by the modern scientific and Enlightenment vision that informed public debates during the late colonial period. This trajectory continued through the

dominance of rationalist discourses in Kerala's modern history, particularly through the interventions of organisations such as the Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP) and the People's Science Movement (PSM). Second, the developmental modernity of the state was enunciated quite significantly in a 'management-oriented scientific language' (Devika 2008:181). Third, Kerala's vibrant political culture has the reading newspaper reading habit at its core (Menon 1994; Jeffrey 2000). Finally, there is a steady increase in the number of public controversies over science appearing in the print media, redefining politics itself in Kerala (2017: 5).

In particular, it helps illuminate how these evolving media ecologies have facilitated the permeation of affective spectacles into the public sphere, which is key to my investigation. In addition to these literature, Mannathukkaren's (2021) work on communist history in South India has been particularly useful for my analysis of the Left's role in legitimising realism as the dominant mode of public address in Kerala. I have drawn extensively on his scholarship to examine the ideological underpinnings of Left cultural politics in the region, especially how the Left's engagement with popular culture has been instrumental in its populist mobilisations.

### *Mourning*

A lot of sociological and anthropological scholarship approaches mourning through its ritualistic significance, viewing it as key to fostering social cohesion and solidarity (Durkheim 2016; Walter 1999; Parry 1994). Durkheim (2016) theorises mourning rituals as collective effervescent practices that reinforce social solidarity and reaffirm communal identity.<sup>6</sup> For him, the collective mourning rituals function as symbolic systems to sacralise the deceased and social practices that manage death's disruptive potential, through shared emotional intensity and performative social obligations. Ariès (1974) and Seale (1998) demonstrate how institutionalisation of death and medicalisation have systematically relocated mortality and mourning from communal spaces to closed clinical settings. Aries argues that modernity's

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<sup>6</sup> By conceptualising mourning as a social duty, Durkheim demonstrates how mourning practices are socially prescribed, emerging from and sustained by a collective moral obligation that reinforces communal bonds.

pathological fear of death is a cultural rupture, showing how industrial societies, in their relentless pursuit of technological progress and youth, have privatised mortality. He points out how it has transformed what was once a communal experience into a taboo-laden process that isolates griever and strips death of its vital social meaning. Seale (1998) analyses the social construction of mortality in modern societies, exploring the tension between personal experiences of grief and the cultural scripts that govern expressions of loss.

Drawing on mourning as a site of socio-cultural and technological mediation, Walter's *On Bereavement: The Culture of Grief* (1999) examines mourning as a socially and culturally embodied practice, rejecting the dominant psychological models that impose linear grief trajectories or detachment mandates. He analyses how individuals negotiate loss through culturally available scripts that he calls grief narratives <sup>7</sup>, ranging from ritualised public lamentation to private narrative reconstruction. His engagements with emergent collective mourning practices, including digital memorials, online support communities, and digitally mediated commemorations, establish how mass media and digital platforms are reconfigured as alternative communal spaces for grief. This work lends itself to the scholarship on how new forms of public affect are constituted, offering insights into how digital platforms mediate mass grieving within a changed cultural media economy of mass grief and memorial cultures. All these works provide a broader context to my investigation of mourning as a contested social process, which is socially, culturally and digitally mediated, so as to understand the embodied dimensions of the cultural politics of mass grieving.

Apart from this, many anthropological works engage mourning through its ritualistic aspects, particularly funerary rites, analysing how they negotiate the disruption that death has caused, while also exposing the material conditions of mourning as a social process. Davies (2002) argues that funerary rituals function as symbolic and rhetorical tools to mediate beliefs about death, the afterlife, and

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<sup>7</sup> Walter introduced the concept of the "grief narrative," emphasising that people construct stories about the deceased and their relationship with them, and these narratives are often shaped by cultural frameworks.

existential continuity while reinforcing communal ties. He also examines the role of material culture—such as graves, monuments, and memorials—in shaping collective memory and identity, a framework I draw upon in my analysis of the commemorative practices surrounding Communist Party workers in Kerala, where such sites function as spaces of ideological reproduction. His work offers insights into the cultural and rhetorical dimensions involved in the ritualisation of death and the memorialization of the deceased, particularly in relation to their affective interaction within the public sphere.

Malkowski (2016) notes the popularity of the genre of documentary deaths in American visual culture, highlighting how digital technologies have transformed the recording and dissemination of real deaths, one of documentary filmmaking's most controversial subjects. Delineating how the question of ethics in documenting death has been replaced by aesthetics with the popularity of this practice, she explains the key roles documentary death has played in visual culture. Whereas Armstrong (2012) explores how mourning films as a genre “focus largely on female characters, share a propensity for ‘muteness’ as language fails to expound the gravity of loss, protagonists who exhibit self-delusion and a loss of agency, the domestic sphere as a recurring site of despair” (41). He traces the transformation of the genre with the rise of modernism in art and literature, and the contemporary contexts of the shifts in film distribution, rise of domestic spectatorship, and proliferation of OTT platforms.

However, scholarship on mourning within the Indian context has largely been anthropological inquiries into funerary rites and mourning rituals, with a predominant focus on caste and religious experiences. Parry's *Death in Banaras* (1994) explores the cultural and religious significance of dying in the Hindu holy city of Banaras, examining how death is simultaneously engaged as a religious event and a social process. Through detailed ethnography, Parry focuses on the Dom caste, who are engaged in the cremations at Manikarnika Ghat, highlighting how hereditary caste-based labour structures operate through systems of role devolution and non-standardised fee negotiations. He foregrounds the tension between the spiritual ideal

of a "good death"—believed to result in moksha (liberation from rebirth)—and the commercialised realities of the death industry.

Building on this framework, Singh's *Dead in Banaras: An Ethnography of Funeral Travelling* (2022) explores the corpses and mourners at the iconic cremation ghats in Banaras, a sacred space where Hindu spiritual aspirations for liberation intersect with the commercialisation of funerary practices. He analyses the death economy of Banaras, examining the caste-structured organisation of funerary labour, including the roles of priests, cremation workers and other ancillary service providers. His work portrays Banaras as both a transformative spiritual landscape and a contested socio-economic terrain, where death rituals enact transcendent religious meanings while simultaneously reproducing material inequalities as access to last rites is mediated by hierarchies of caste and economic capital. The scholarship enriches my enquiries on how affective flows emerging from death practices are culturally mediated and materially circulated, coconstituting the production of grief economies.

In addition, contemporary scholarship has increasingly examined how mourning transcends its conventional social and ritual functions to assume political significance (Butler 2004, 2016; Das 2006; Chatterji 2020; Malik 2018). This body of work examines how affective responses to loss, emerging through ethical encounters with mortality, transform mourning into a distinctly political phenomenon that challenges dominant power structures and potentially mobilise collective resistance. Butler (2016) examines how public mourning manifests systemic violence and inequality, questioning why some deaths are mourned while others are disregarded. Their scholarship suggests that collective mourning can foster ethical responsibility and solidarity, urging a rethinking of precarity in social and political life.

Viewing mourning as a political act, Prakash (2022) interrogates the diverse manifestations of solidarity that emerge within the spatial and temporal constraints of mourning. He examines how mass grieving becomes a site of radical solidarities

built upon shared affective and ethical engagements with the dead. My research expands this inquiry by demonstrating how mourning practices performatively generate solidarity through embodied communal gestures or affective mobilisations upon a shared sense of vulnerability or public defiance. Whereas Malik (2018) examines how women's participation in funerary processions in Kashmir challenges both state sovereignty and traditional gender roles, transforming grief into a form of political resistance. She argues that this shift redefines mourning as a feminist political act through reconfiguring gendered meanings of political actions in Kashmir's socio-political landscape as a conflict zone.

Analysing how mourning is embodied in the everyday lives of post-violence societies, Das (2006) explores how grief and trauma from catastrophic violence, such as the Partition of India and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, permeate the everyday lives of survivors, reshaping their memory, language, and social relations. Through an ethnographic study, she examines mourning as a dynamic process where personal sorrow intertwines with collective rituals and political contestation. Das illustrates how the grief and trauma of these events are inscribed in the mundane lives of survivors carrying the weight of unresolved loss in domestic routines, kinship ties, and ritualised mourning.

Sarkar's *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (2009) examines how Indian cinema grapples with the collective trauma of the Partition of India in 1947, analysing the intersections of cinematic memory with history. Moving beyond the models of trauma, loss and mourning in the context of the Holocaust and slavery that dominate the Western academic engagements, he delineates how partition manifests as a festering wound, whose harrowing memories continue to loom over post-colonial Indian public life in many ways. Contesting the dismissal of partition as a historical anomaly, he analyses how cinema participates in an act of cultural mourning, engaging with the deep psychological scars engendered by the corporeal violence, displacement, and loss following the event. By situating Indian cinema within the broader context of postcolonial trauma and memory, this work

illustrates how cultural texts mediate the affective and political dimensions of collective loss, grief, memory and healing of the national trauma of partition.

However, there is a significant dearth of academic literature on mourning practices in the context of Kerala. One of the few seminal contributions to this field is Cybil's (2013) work *From Ritual to Republic: Death as a Democratic Discourse* which analyses the martyrdom of Sardar Gopala Krishnan, a schoolteacher and Communist Party of India activist, who was killed in a police firing on the first Republic Day of India, 26th January 1950, in the erstwhile Malabar district. The book shows the distinct ways in which mourning is undertaken for his death in a distinct ritualistic fashion, and the concepts of martyrdom and sacrifice are employed to structure the commemorative practices surrounding his death. He specifically focuses on how mourning takes a ritualistic form through the annual observance of *Sardar Dinam*, held on January 26<sup>th</sup>, which charts a symbolic and politically charged narrative of martyrdom.

Whereas Menon's essay, *The Point of Death: Religious Conversion and the Self in South India* (2024), adopts an ethnographic and comparative approach to examine the critical turns the lives and deaths of two male Muslim converts had to endure in the public sphere of Kerala. Focusing on the handling of their bodies, which were donated and cremated despite their wishes for an Islamic funeral, Menon shows that death serves as a moment for the negotiation and redefinition of religious identities and familial ties. He argues that although these figures became religiously indeterminate through various contradictory stances, their connection to their kin was ultimately affirmed as critical sites to engage with the afterlives of the dead bodies in an arguably rationalist public sphere. This study seeks to address the lack of scholarly literature on mourning practices in the region, particularly in relation to their negotiations with the public sphere, by offering an affective reading of Kerala modernity.

## **Research Objectives**

The primary objective of the thesis is to analyse how mourning can be analysed as a cultural site to examine the conflicts inherent in the dominant conceptualisations of the public sphere. Following this, I examine how spectacles of the affective excesses of distinct mourning publics demonstrate the diverse terrains melodrama inhabits in the public cultures of Kerala despite a long-standing trajectory of ideological concessions towards melodramatic public cultures. This is further engaged through an enquiry into how their performative intensities are embodied in a range of visual materials on mass grief. This gives vital insights on how the emotional intensities surrounding these sites of mass grief are mediated into cultural or political expressions of mass affect. The thesis would further analyse the unique cultural, political, and technological contexts in which these mediated cultural forms of emerge and how do they negotiate or coopt the melodramatic valences of the proposed mourning sites. Locating this conflict as a historical burden emanating from the trajectory of the state's public sphere, upon the cultural capital of print-mediated rational deliberations and its manifestations in the privileging of realism as the dominant mode of address, I grapple with how the state engages in uneasy negotiations with the melodramatic excess at mourning sites. Thus, rather than viewing melodramatic transgressions in mourning merely as disruptions that expose the limits of the state's rationalist mediation of affect, I aim to examine how the visceral intensity of public mourning that unsettles the rational civic order compels the state to engage in an uneasy negotiation with these melodramatic excesses. Taking cues from this tension, I would analyse how the performative spectacles of melodrama in these sites unravel as the juxta political formations (Berlant 2009). The thesis thus investigates the unique cultural, political and technological dynamics of this negotiation between state power, public emotion and visual media, with its underpinnings in the larger cultural politics of the state. Bringing the intersections of mass participation and melodramatic transgressions via the visual culture of public mourning into conversation, the thesis offers an affective account of the state's public culture, focusing on its entanglement with melodramatic mobilisations of public affect.

## **Methodology**

This thesis employs a qualitative approach to analyse the tension between melodrama and rationality in Kerala. It is undertaken primarily through three case studies, which explores the corporeal and mediated intensities of mourning publics in celebrity funerals, Malayalam cinema and political violence. Formulated as three empirical chapters, these case studies offer in depth analysis of distinct cultural practices of mass grieving which variously embody the implications of the negotiations of melodrama with Kerala's cultural politics. They offer key insights in to how this conflict is negotiated in the diegetic and non-diegetic world as well in the visual media cultures formed around these sites. Although these cases were chosen based on the preliminary hypothesis that their affective excess poses a counter picture to the rational anchoring of the state's public sphere, engaging them as distinct empirical cases has enabled me to understand the peculiar socio-political, cultural, economic and technological context in which melodrama acquires remarkable cultural significance. It has also helped me grapple with the unique cultural and political dynamics of their mediations into monumental media spectacles, performative sites of melodrama, and the visual populism of martyr iconography, as elaborated in respective empirical chapters.

I have adopted visual methods to engage with these cultural practices, specifically to understand the performative dimensions of mass affect displayed at these sites. To explore the nuances of the public's emotional outpouring at celebrity funerals and a televisual economy built around it, I examine the in-person attendance and the emotional outpouring of the public at the celebrity funerals and their live television broadcasts and social media circulation. The chapter on cinematic mediations of the mourning publics draws on a recent corpus of Malayalam films, bringing into conversation the broader ideological and industrial shifts in contemporary Malayalam cinema. The chapter on public mourning and commemoration of the slain Communist party workers engages an array of visual cultural texts, including televised funeral coverage, popular visual

tributes such as posters, graffiti, and murals, and commemorative infrastructures (martyr memorials, statues, and territorial inscriptions of martyrdom), as well as their cinematic adaptations as political biopics. These diverse range of visual materials has helped me to understand how the affective excesses in these sites manifest as the political and cultural lives of melodrama, beyond its dominant identity as an aesthetic category attached to performative traditions and mass entertainment, especially in spaces where its legitimacy as a mode of formal aggregation has been denied.

A preliminary fieldwork conducted in parts of Kannur and Malappuram has provided a partial ethnographic grounding for this study. This includes semi-structured interviews in which respondents shared personal narratives and anecdotes about their participation in celebrity funerals, their encounters with mediated forms of mass grief, as well as official narratives from party offices and public perspectives on the communist iconography of martyrdom. I have also employed other qualitative research methods such as discourse analysis and archival media data along with a close observation of these cultural sites and the affect and symbolism that forms their structural core. This study lies at the intersections of the cultural anthropology of mass emotions, melodrama studies, and the visual cultures of mass grief while drawing on the disciplinary methodologies from cultural studies, media studies and visual anthropology.

## **Chapterisation**

The thesis is organised within four core chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first chapter offers a historical and cultural context for the conflicts that the affective intensities of mourning publics pose to the discourses of progressive rationality built around Kerala's public sphere. The core of this chapter lies in the historical tension between melodrama and realism and its ideological underpinnings in the state's cultural politics. The role of the Left cultural politics in building realism as a privileged mode of public culture is extensively analysed in this chapter, particularly in relation to how its rigorous engagement with the spheres

of the popular for populist consolidation manifests in realism's hegemonic position in the state's public sphere. It also examines how the organised interventions to cultivate public rationality through progressive literary movements, rational movements, mass campaigns for science education, and the appropriation of various everyday social spaces as networks of public reason resulted in the historical imagination of the public sphere as constituted through the trajectory of rational deliberations. This is undertaken to delineate how the consolidation of a public sphere around a strong reading culture and public rationality, which anchors the state's public discourses in rational landscapes of a developmental modernity, culminated in the rejection of the cultural authenticity of melodrama in public culture. The chapter concludes by framing these debates within the larger body of literature on critiques of Kerala modernity, posing the scope of an affective reading of modernity, which is proposed in this thesis.

The second chapter grapples with the corporeal and mediated intensities of mourning publics at celebrity funerals in Kerala, focusing on both in-person attendance and participation through TV and live-streaming platforms. It analyses the affective economy of grief, which is shaped by the live media coverage of emotional moments that converge into monumental spectacles. The chapter thus analyses how this economy, driven by the urgency of "liveness," has been materialised with the shift from traditional to new media over the past two decades. Analysing how these spectacles, which often embody the cultural manifestations of popular sovereignty, are crucial for understanding mass participation in Kerala, the chapter demonstrates how the monumentality of the mourning public contradicts Kerala's claims to rational exceptionalism. Along with establishing these spectacles of mass grief at celebrity funerals as a cultural counterpoint to the rational Malayali public sphere, the chapter also maps out the distinctive ways in which the monumental eruption of grief is rationalised by a "civic sense".

The third chapter explores the melodramatic transgressions of mourning in contemporary Malayalam cinema, focusing on *Ee.Ma.Yau*. (Lijo Jose Pellissery 2017) and *Jana Gana Mana* (Dijo Jose Antony 2022) as film texts to analyse how

the unruly expressions of grief, rage, and transgression of distinct mourning publics emerge as sites for negotiating justice. These films depict mourning publics that contest the structural and symbolic violence inherent in a public sphere dominated by realist aesthetics, revealing a historical binary in Malayalam cinema that privileges realism over melodrama, thereby framing emotional excess as irrational. The chapter argues that contemporary Malayalam cinema marks a significant aesthetic-political shift, as melodramatic spectacles of collective mourning disrupt the entrenched realism-melodrama binary and the public-private dichotomy. It demonstrates how cinematic mourning serves as a discursive proxy for the bereaved's confrontation with institutional power, which materialises grief as a discursive site for articulating rage, protest and solidarity. Furthermore, it situates these communal mobilisations of grief within Kerala's socio-historical trajectory, examining how they challenge the rationalist foundations of the public sphere while also reflecting Malayalam cinema's evolving engagements with community formations and the state's political history. The chapter also interrogates the conflicts manifested in these films in relation to the broader industrial and political shifts in Malayalam cinema, including the transition toward a dynamic streaming ecosystem along with the ideological reconfigurations that address new political questions.

The fourth chapter critically engages with the ceremonial reverence accorded to victims of political violence in Kerala, which transforms them into martyrs through a mass-mediated cultural process. Analysing the visual culture of martyr discourses consolidated around the murders of the party workers of the Communist Parties, it examines how the commemorative rituals and symbolic mourning generated around death transform martyrdom into a political spectacle of massive visual appeal. This chapter thus critically engages with how fostering of these martyr cults imbues them with the agency of active political actors within the local cultural and political milieus and, therefore, contributes significant symbolic value to the political identity of the Left in Kerala. The major focus of the chapter is on how the mass mourning and commemoration processes, where the revolutionary moment of Leftist politics and the ideals of anti-authoritarianism are intertwined via

the cultural processes of martyrdom, respond to the state's claims of a public sphere built on the rational mediation of public affect.

## **Chapter 1**

### **A Critical Appraisal of Kerala's Rational Modernity**

This chapter establishes a cultural and political context to the tension between melodrama and realism in Kerala. The core focus of the chapter lies on the ideological underpinnings of this tension to the state's cultural politics and the rational credentials ascribed to its public sphere. The chapter, thus, traces the public discourses/ counter-discourses surrounding public rationality in the state, built around the networks of public rationality and the claims of a reading public. It extensively deals with the Left cultural interventions in lionising public rationality, a byproduct of the hegemony of Left political tradition in the region. The Left's interventions towards the consolidation of the 'popular' via social realism holds vital significance to my account of political history in this chapter. I have therefore analysed how the networks of rationality promoted by the Left have led to the historical tension between realism and melodrama, along with a critical account of the narratives on the state's public sphere around a specific developmental trajectory and its attendant rational, progressive credentials. Subsequently, I delineate how the consolidation of a public sphere around the discursive intensity of public rationality, which anchors the state's public discourses in the progressive landscapes of a developmental modernity, legitimises the rejection of the cultural authenticity of melodrama in public culture. The chapter also situates the thesis within the academic scholarship on the critiques of Kerala modernity that contest the canonization of Kerala modernity as an exceptional paradigm of developmental modernity. Subsequently, I locate the permeation of the mass affect through mourning sites into the public sphere in correspondence to the emergence of new public spheres around visual media and new media platforms, marking a remarkable shift from the text mediated rational deliberations of the state. The chapter thus elucidates melodrama in mass grieving as a potent cultural form to understand Kerala's public sphere, as mourning sites materialise their conflicts with the rational enclosures of the public sphere. Therefore, a critical appraisal of the Left's interventions in the spheres of culture and popular domains in constructing what is

argued to be a 'people's public sphere' and its dialectical relationship with melodrama is vital to identifying the ruptures inherent in the state's public sphere, which is built upon a plank of public reason. I begin with a brief account of the dominance of the Left political tradition in Kerala, which has emerged as a key representative of the region's cultural history.

### **Communism and Kerala**

My account of the political history in this chapter begins from the 1930s, mostly with the Left interventions to gain popularity among the working classes. Although the precolonial and colonial history of the state is vital in understanding the political and cultural history of the state, my focus is more on how the later interventions of the party, especially in the cultural spheres culminated in the hierarchical contest of realism over melodrama. Hence, this chapter draws more on an account of the Left's cultural interventions to appropriate the everyday spaces and sites of the popular and as networks of public rationality. This chapter does not follow a strictly linear historical narrative; instead, it examines the literary and popular movements through which the Left consolidated the cultural legitimacy of realism in relation to their interactions with material developments in the public sphere.

Since the late 1930's, the successful mobilisation of working-class communities has led to the widespread acceptance of communist ideology in Kerala, culminating in significant electoral victories for Leftist parties. Drawing on its roots as an anticolonial and anti-feudal movement, the rise of Communism in the state enabled the Left to establish a socialist democracy within a parliamentary framework. Its popularity in the region is thus attributed to the traction it gained among the marginalised and working-class populations, resonating with their aspirations for social justice and equitable distribution of resources. As a result, it is often credited to its divergence from typical Leftist methods and revolutionary rhetoric, prioritising a commitment to progressive socio-economic development and adopting a distinct approach to expand its social support base. The evolution of Left politics is thus exemplified by the Communist

Party's transformation from a small fraction of radicals within the nationalist movement to assuming leadership in post-independence coalition governments with a substantial social base.

The rise of communist ideology in Kerala as a key political force predominantly resulted from its mobilisation efforts among peasants and working-class communities. Drawing on a thematic history of communism in South India, Mannathukaran (2021) argues that these mobilisations are not merely the "result of the spontaneous movement of the peasantry," as valorised in the subaltern studies (2022: 77). He rather locates these transformations as resulting from the Left's ability to mobilise upon the spontaneous feelings of the masses, shaped by their everyday experiences of suffering and exploitations, guided by the Gramscian idea of 'common sense' (2011).<sup>8</sup>

The success in mobilizing the working-class sentiments against the material conditions of precolonial and colonial Kerala, especially the class inequalities created by feudal land relations, consolidated the Left's dominance among the peasants. A complex land tenure system, known as the *jati-janmi-naduvazhi medhavitvam* (caste-landlord-chieftain hegemony), defined the means of production and other social relations in premodern Kerala (Herring 1983 ).<sup>9</sup> It not only concentrated land ownership in the hands of the upper castes, Nambudiris and Nairs, with many attendant social and symbolic privileges, but also legitimised the agrestic slavery of many Dalit castes, who worked as cultivating tenants on the land of upper-caste feudal landlords. Against these feudal agrarian social relations, the Left mobilised the peasant labourers to fight against feudalism and demand their political and economic rights. These interventions towards a structural and material transformation of the social system were key to building a national popular will (Gramsci 1971) for the Left by overcoming the divide between the nationalist elite, represented by the Indian National Congress and the common masses. The success

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<sup>8</sup> For Gramsci, common sense is an active ideological force that sustains hegemony, potentially shaping people's perceptions and consent to the status quo. He posits that common sense can be transformed through intellectual intervention, where a "critical" or "philosophical" common sense could challenge the prevailing order and lay the groundwork for revolutionary change.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Thorner defines this system as a "many-tiered edifice of interests in land—*janmies* [landlords], *kanamadars* [kanakkars, superior or supervising tenants], *verumpattadars* [verumpattakkars], cultivating tenants or tenants-at-will—that rests on a mass of landless labourers known as Cherumas, Pulayars, or Poliyars [Dalit untouchable castes]" (Herring 1983).

of the Left was hugely facilitated by the popular disenchantment with Gandhian nationalism and reformist ideology for its reluctance to bring the lower castes to its fold and failures in engaging with the question of caste, region, class and religion (Nampoothirippad 2010). In such a context, the communist interventions to engage with the everyday lives of the labouring masses by positioning the peasantry as the fulcrum of mass mobilisation and by rejecting the Gandhian notion of passive revolution<sup>10</sup> helped them gain a substantial hold over the masses.

The formation of peasant unions (*karshaka sanghams*) to fight for the economic and political rights of farmers gave these efforts a more organised structure. The growth of these unions also allowed the Left to broaden its focus beyond the rural peasantry to include urban workers in industries such as tilemaking, textiles, tin production, weaving, and others (Mannathukaran 2021). The widespread influence of peasant unions helped the Left establish the groundwork for the modern trade union movement in Kerala. A crucial aspect of these unions' populist appeal was their efforts to educate members through night schools held in labour union offices. These schools provided foundational lessons in socialism, antiimperialist struggles, and trade unionism, fostering critical consciousness among peasants and workers. Informed by the radical populism of the Left ideology, it thus mobilised the lower-level peasantry and the emerging working class, who had been the strong base of the Communist movement in its early phases.

All these efforts, particularly during the 1930s to the 1950s, played a crucial role in the political mobilisation of communist ideology and the consolidation of the constitutional Left in Kerala. This momentum culminated in the rise of the first communist government in 1957, followed by the implementation of many progressive policies, notably in land reform and social welfare, which solidified the region's strong association with communist politics. However, what gave the communist movement a populist face was its interactions with the domain of the popular and its consolidation in shaping the public sphere. These interactions were

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<sup>10</sup> The Gandhian notion of passive revolution refers to a process of social and political change that occurs gradually and without violent rupture, where existing power structures are subtly transformed through non-violent resistance and the mobilisation of mass consciousness, rather than through overt confrontation or revolution.

crucial in the rise of the social Left over the political Left, despite the significant transformations the parliamentary Left underwent over nearly seven decades. The rise of the Left as a cultural force with a hegemonic role rather than a key political force is important for this thesis's enquiry. I will look at how the cultural interventions of the Left in forming and negotiating the public sphere were undertaken with a clear privileging of realist discourses, which played a huge role in fashioning the public discourses of progressive rationality around Kerala's public sphere.

### **Consolidations of the 'popular'**

In addition to the investments in the economic spheres, culture served as an important site of contestation for hegemony within the Leftist project in Kerala. The construction of a national popular will, key to its hegemony, was achieved primarily through an active engagement with the domains of culture. The national popular will, a concept developed by Gramsci (1971), refers to the collective political and cultural expression of subaltern social groups, particularly the working class, which emerges through a process of ideological and organisational mobilisation to challenge hegemonic power structures.<sup>11</sup> He emphasises the importance of culture and ideology in shaping this will, contending that this will must ideally reflect the needs and desires of the common populace rather than the elite interests. Similarly, Leftist interventions aimed at constructing a collective will of the people sought to cultivate a new popular consciousness that unified diverse social categories around common interests, predominantly around a unified Malayali national identity. The emphasis placed by the communist movement on culture as a fundamental component of society led it to view modernity not merely as "institutional change brought about by the extension of rational action" (Lele 1981), but as a broader process essential for achieving cultural hegemony for the Left in Kerala. Moving beyond the mobilisation strategies of the national movement, which have been criticised for neglecting the cultural reproduction of society (Kaviraj 2014), it placed culture at the center as a site of contestation.

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<sup>11</sup> For Gramsci, the national popular will involves the creation of a broad-based political alliance underpinned by organic intellectuals to bring democratic and transformative social change.

These interventions sought to leverage the coercive potential of communist ideology through literature, cinema, and theatre, among others, with the backing of many progressive literary and cultural movements. They gave rise to a new aesthetic in literature and popular culture grounded in the tradition of social realism, which later manifested as pivotal for its engagement with the public sphere. The Progressive Literary Movement<sup>12</sup>, an organised collective of writers, poets, and intellectuals aligned with communist ideology, played a key role in shaping a literary culture that resonated with the social and ideological foundations of the Left. The movement emerged Kerala in the 1930s with the aim of producing works to support anti-imperialist struggles. The interventions of the writers associated with this movement through novels, short stories, poetry, and cinema adopted the aesthetics of social realism. It foregrounded the material conditions of poverty, caste, and class inequality as the thematic focus of their literary works, highlighting the role of literature as a vehicle for social change and justice. These literary interventions highlighted the everyday struggles of the ordinary people and the poor, reflecting an explicitly political outlook developed by the communist Party and the Left-led progressive movements. Through an evident shift from the focus on elite literary representations and aesthetic concerns to the struggles of marginalised groups, including lower castes, peasants, the rural poor, and the working class, these works advocated communist politics as an emancipatory ideology. Through the works of writers like P. Kesavadev, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Ayyappa Paniker, and others associated with this movement, this movement facilitated the Left's creation of a national-popular will in literary discourses. As a key element of the South Asian cultural Left, the interventions of the Progressive Writers' Group (PWG) linked the political and literary spheres, aiming for radical social transformation and the popularisation of the ideological foundation of the Leftist movement in Kerala.

The engagements of these Progressive writers constructed a modern subjectivity challenging the caste and class structures and built a common cultural identity, challenging the upper caste narratives in canonical literature. At a time

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<sup>12</sup> The movement included renowned writers like Vaikom Mohammed Basheer, Thakazhi Shivashankara Pillai, and P. Keshava Dev, as well as celebrated poets such as Vallathol Narayana Menon, Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, and G. Shankara Kurup. Playwrights like Thoppil Bhasi and K.T. Muhammed were also key figures in this movement.

when Kerala was divided into three Malayalam-speaking regions, the movement's focus on developing a literary culture centred on the Malayalam language, shifting away from the dominance of Sanskrit—which had previously restricted literary consumption to the educated elite—helped forge a common Malayali linguistic identity. Additionally, it played a crucial role in fostering an active literary readership, particularly among the newly emerging middle class. These interventions collectively facilitated the progressive agenda of the Left, embedding the social realist tradition in Malayalam literature, which extensively contributed to the populist consolidation of the Left. Although it challenged the elite literature of the time, especially its focus on aesthetic refinement, philosophical reflection, and the experiences of the urban middle and upper classes, social realism emerged as the dominant thematic and aesthetic concern in Malayalam literature. The massive legitimacy that the writers associated with this movement and the progressive sensibilities that their works embodied resulted in social realism established as the dominant thematic and aesthetic concern in Malayalam literature. It also manifested in producing a hierarchy between high and low art, with the cultural authenticity of realism over melodrama. The newly emergent middle-class Malayali reading public was placed at the center of this literary culture. The literary works of the Progressive Writers Group thus soon began to be regarded as canonical texts, esteemed for their adherence to realist conventions, while the authors themselves were elevated to the status of iconic literary figures. They were deemed exemplars of superior literary and aesthetic merit. This resulted in a clear divide between melodrama and realism, wherein tearjerkers or *painkili* literature, the genre of titillating and sentimental romance novels appealing to the female audience, was devalued by the literary and film critics against social realism's moral and aesthetic legitimacy (Joseph 2012: 110). The literary merits ascribed to the works of the canonical writers have been crucial in defining what constituted melodrama in literature and popular cinema.

The social realist wave in literature was effectively translated into popular cinema with the interventions of the artists and writers associated with the Progressive Writing Group and Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC). The artists and writers of these two cultural and literary bodies were closely affiliated with the

Communist Party in the state. The interventions of these collectives played a vital role in converting popular cinema into a major ideological apparatus in mobilising the Left political ideology in Kerala. Subsequently, the extensive engagement of these literary bodies with social realism, an aesthetic project that introduced "a thematic shift [from the socials, mythological, stunt and adventure films, romances, etc.], focusing attention on the poor and the exploited but continued to feature a melodramatic narrative" (Prasad 1998: 160) became key to the Left's imagining of the newly emergent state of Kerala and in defining the progressive credentials around its public sphere. During a period when popular Indian cinema was increasingly criticised for its inability to meet the conventions of realist narrative cinema, the dominance of social realism in Malayalam cinema (Prasad 1998) was recognised as a consequence of the influence of communist interventions in the dominant historical narratives.

Social realism in popular cinema massively helped the Left build a discourse of people's public sphere through narratives of social justice, mass mobilisations and egalitarian social spaces. It won a solid base for the populist consolidation of the Party. The communist interventions in mobilising upon the popular, melodramatic excesses of cinema hugely helped the Left to mould a sphere of the 'new popular' that would address 'the masses'—the object of the Left's political mobilisation, which later became crucial in the rational progressive imaginations around these spheres (Joseph 2012: 69). The predominance of social realism in Malayalam cinema thus turned out to be instrumental in building the cultural authenticity of realism as a mode of address or aesthetics. Joseph (2012) argues that it enabled the Left to propose a discourse of rationality, imagined as emanating from communism, as the uniting element of Malayali nationalism.

However, the political mobilisation of the Left bypassed this hierarchy through appropriating popular visual and performative forms. This was done primarily through adopting popular cultural mediums such as theatre, folk songs, and *kathaprasangam* to communicate communism to a largely illiterate mass audience. These initiatives heavily drew on the aesthetics street culture and vernacular performances. It was also accompanied by appropriating public spaces such as town

squares, public libraries etc. as sites to stage these performances. One of the most important cultural movements that enabled the Left to this is the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC), a theatrical movement established in the 1950s by writers and artists closely aligned with the Communist Party of India. The interventions of the KPAC brought about a structural shift in Malayalam theatre through a decisive turn towards realism. Unlike the early modern Malayalam dramas, which were primarily adaptations of Sanskrit texts and religious epics, the political plays of KPAC transformed the theatre into a rational, reflective practice conceptualised as a tool for social and political change. The highly successful plays by KPAC in the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Patta Bakki* (Rent Arrears), *Mooladhanam* (Capital), *Sarvekallu* (Survey Stone), *Nammalonnu* (We are One), *Mudiyanyaya Puthran* (The Prodigal Son), and *Puthiya Aakasam, Puthiya Bhoomi* (New Sky, New Earth), contributed to the development of a new literary aesthetics through a social realist movement in theatre. The thematic concerns of KPAC's plays were central to the ideological underpinnings of communist mobilisation, and they fostered modern subjectivity among the mass audience, building a Left common sense in the public discourses.

The Left's interventions through KPAC also played a key role in democratising visual culture, which had previously been confined to the temples and mansions of feudal lords (Mananthukaran 2021). Apart from the public spaces like *kavalas* (town squares), KPAC's plays were shown in peasant union meetings and communist party conferences to educate the masses on critical concerns such as land reform, feudal exploitation, and the class struggle of the rural poor. These plays served as tool for political mobilization, making socialist ideas more accessible to the masses. These efforts significantly contributed to the hegemony of communist cultural and political activism, as they engaged with popular mediums to facilitate a broad populist mobilisation. Mananthukaran (2021) argues that while traditional art forms were restricted by cultural and spatial limitations, theatre emerged as the first medium to transcend these barriers, addressing a secular Kerala public and advancing the construction of the national-popular beyond the divisions of caste, class, and religious identities.

The initiatives of KPAC writers and artists through theatre and popular cinema were therefore influential in establishing the category of popular left in Kerala through a populist consolidation of the Communist movement in the '60s and early '70s. This helped the Left in mobilising upon the theatre, which became the primary instrument of social criticism and a weapon of social change by the 1950s. The popularity of the communist leaders mobilised through these visual media, primarily via the plays and songs of the prominent KPAC artist Thoppil Bhasi, is argued to have played a crucial role in capturing state power in the elections of 1957 for the Left. Through an analysis of Thoppil Bhasi's historic play *You Made Me a Communist* and its five responsive "counter plays", Eldhose (2017) explores how theatre engaged with the sociocultural challenges of its time, fostering active public discourse through political messages that resist dominant political and social institutions. He argues that the play *You Made Me a Communist* not only gained significance within Kerala's artistic landscape but also made a profound impact on its political sphere, being recognised as the "play that turned Kerala red" (Kurup 2009: 26).

It is crucial to note that the influence communism gained through these interventions stemmed from its ability to incorporate the popular spheres into the political mobilisation process. This, in turn, significantly transformed cultural spheres, engendering a new aesthetic of popular culture. It was grounded in contesting the dominance of the Sanskrit canonical tradition by prioritising folk traditions and democratising the performing arts and making them accessible to a broader public, which had previously been confined to temples, shrines, or feudal estates.<sup>13</sup> Thus, communist interventions in culture can be viewed as part of a protracted process of cultural democratisation.

Thus, it is evident that the Left political project in Kerala cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural interventions, as the ability to bridge the divide between culture and the people played a crucial role in the communist hegemony. Therefore, the dominance of communism in the state's cultural politics is closely tied to the significant changes the Left engendered in the aesthetic realm,

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<sup>13</sup> The subalternisation of language, facilitated by communist intervention, allowed the cultural practices of subaltern groups to gain a prominent place within the aesthetic imagination of Kerala.

particularly in the popular domains of theatre and cinema. Furthermore, it can be argued that the success of Leftist political mobilisation in Kerala was largely contingent upon the changes in both the material/political and cultural/ideational spheres. This was largely facilitated by the writers and artists associated with the progressive literary and cultural movements, which helped bridge the divide between intellectuals and the masses. These movements were thus key to creating a national-popular cultural identity, allowing the Left to consolidate its influence by integrating art, culture, and society into its political mobilisation.

### **A common Malayali cultural identity**

In addition to the above-mentioned interventions, the investments in building a national cultural identity around the Malayalam language extensively leveraged the Left's populist consolidation. The conflicts over national identity, predominantly the anxieties of linguistic identity taking precedence over national identity, have defined the political landscape in post-independence India (Prasad 2014; Kaviraj 2010). Prasad (2014) traces these cultural and political tensions in the hegemonic efforts to conceptualise India as a singular nation rather than a federation of diverse nationalities. Kaviraj (2010) argues that the conflict over linguistic nationalities, whether aimed at undermining them as rival forces or integrating them into the fabric of the nation, is fundamentally driven by the language question and its implications for democratic governance, alongside the anxieties about the emergence of independent nationalities based on linguistic identities.

The language movements that emerged from non-Hindi-speaking regions, particularly the South Indian states opposing the central government's attempts to impose Hindi as the national language, were characterised by strong cultural nationalism rooted in the political aspirations of respective linguistic nationalities. It is in its manifestations of state formations based on linguistic identity that the Left political parties actively intervened with the question of language as a medium of mass mobilisation. These interventions in Kerala were largely centred around consolidating a unified cultural identity around the Malayalam language with concerted efforts to mobilise around the language question to enable the rise of 'political commons' (Prasad 2015). The mass mobilisations based on linguistic

identity, therefore, constitute a key component of the national-popular project for the Left in Kerala.

The Leftist movements centred around the Malayalam language laid the groundwork for the *Aikya Kerala* movement (United Kerala movement), a social and political campaign in the early 20th century that advocated for the unification of the princely states of Kerala into a single entity. The movement consolidated the Left's national-popular project in which the democratic aspirations of people were channelised to an imagination of a modern, egalitarian Kerala (Muhammad 2017). At a time when the state was organised into three distinct Malayalam-speaking regions, Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, the linguistic mobilisation project helped the Left to construct an alliance among various social groups with disparate demands. Prasad argues that the "linguistic, national identity is historically the first larger unity that directly posits the dialectical transcendence of caste-communal identities" (2014:98). For Prasad, linguistic identity challenges those prior identities, enters into direct confrontation with them and reduces them to 'private' or lower-level identities. Similarly, in a social structure deeply divided by caste, class, religion, region, and gender, the engagements with the *Aikya Kerala* movement enabled the Left to forge a unified Malayali identity as a foundational category with the potential to transcend these entrenched social divisions (Muhammad 2017). The subsequent rise of a common Malayali linguistic and cultural identity was, however, extensively aided by a multifaceted mobilisation process of the Left that cut across diverse cultural domains such as fiction, poetry, theatre, songs, storytelling (*kathaprasangam*), cinema and so on.

These interventions extensively helped the Left to set the ground for a public sphere centred around the construction of a Malayali national popular. By positioning the Malayalam language as a platform for manifesting its national popular project, the Left interventions through the *Aikya Kerala* movement aligned the Malayali cultural identity with the rising popular aspirations for the democratisation of society by the mid-twentieth century. This vision was grounded in the idea of creating a "Malayalam" homeland as a modern, egalitarian space,

which in turn propelled the Left's construction of a Malayali national-popular identity, steering its populist consolidations in Kerala.

Anderson (1983) marks the rise of vernacular languages as a crucial precondition for the rise of the modern nation-state, exploring how the early modern European nation-states were formed based on national print languages.<sup>14</sup> He points out how print capitalism consolidated nationalism by binding together people with a homogenous linguistic identity, culture, myths and customs. Similarly, the popularity of print in Kerala extensively helped the Left in its national popular project around the Malayalam language, grounded in Malayali nationalism. It led to the creation of a standardised Malayalam, which manifested in a sense of cohesion among the culturally and linguistically diverse population and their imaginations of a common Malayali public sphere. Likewise, a sense of linguistic homogeneity around the Malayalam language enabled various heterogeneous communities dispersed along cultural and community lines to form new relationships with the state of Kerala. It helped them identify themselves as national communities through a shared linguistic and cultural identity.

What lies at the centre of the Left interventions in fostering a collective cultural identity around the Malayalam language, through organised efforts to democratisise the popular culture and liberate the Malayalam language from the dominance of Sanskrit, was the idea of a "people's language". It echoed similar movements, such as the mobilisations under E.V. Ramaswamy in Tamil Nadu, which also critiqued Sanskrit for perpetuating inequality among the subaltern communities in Tamil society. In both cases, linguistic mobilisation was a key to the political and cultural aspirations of the marginalised or the common people (Pandian 2002). These extensive cultural interventions on language not only facilitated populist consolidation for the Left but also helped establish a public sphere grounded in a Leftist common sense. This, in turn, enabled the Left to play a significant role in

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<sup>14</sup> Emphasising the potential of language in the growth of nationalism, Anderson argues that the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1454 standardised vernacular languages in Europe via publishing entrepreneurs and led to the exponential growth of nationalism. He delineates it via the concept of print capitalism, illustrating how the mass market demand for book sales helped construct European nationalism, although as an unintended outcome.

constructing an arguably "people's public sphere," defined by many rational, progressive credentials of its public rationality.

### **The 'people's public sphere' and a Left rationality**

The aforementioned dynamics of populist politics manifested in consolidating a public sphere upon an arguably Left common sense and its discursive manifestations in public rationality. The concept of the public sphere, originally elaborated by Habermas (1991), is denoted as a deliberative sphere where public opinions are formed through rational, critical debates and public discussions.<sup>15</sup> For Habermas, the public sphere is a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest" (Fraser 58). It is thus conceptualised as a discursive arena wherein "practical reason is institutionalised through norms of reasoned discourse" (Calhoun 306).<sup>16</sup> A significant body of academic scholarship on the genealogy of Kerala's public sphere explores its relationship with the Habermasian model (Ajayakumar 2021; BijuKumar 2019). Ajayakumar (2021), in her study on the gender question and the Malayali public sphere, argues that the Malayali public sphere, which began to take shape in its rudimentary form in the late nineteenth century, finds a rough theoretical parallel in Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere. This parallel has been drawn primarily around the idea that the reading public has nurtured both models. The development of an active reading public, consisting of a widespread newspaper reading culture with the working class at its core, is attributed to the influence of the Left political movement in shaping Kerala's progressive Malayali citizenry. The popularity of print, predominantly

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<sup>15</sup> Habermas's idea of the public sphere garnered substantial legitimacy as a counterforce to absolutist states in the backdrop of two major socio-political transitions in early modern Europe: 1) the shift from the monarchical and feudal order to the liberal bourgeoisie constitutional order and 2) the disintegration of the proposed 'liberal' order buttressed by a bourgeoisie public sphere to the modern mass society (1962: 181-222). A pivotal aspect of the shift from the closed feudal system to the liberal constitutional order was the emergence of the bourgeois middle class that engendered a clear distinction between private and public spheres, which Habermas identifies as central to his concept of the public sphere. It marked a clear departure from the earlier feudal order in which the distinction between the state and society was not drawn. Hence, it was politically organised through several modes of "representative" publicity.

<sup>16</sup> Tracing the genealogy of the public sphere in the social circumstances in European countries such as Britain, France, and Germany during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the emergence of the middle class, essentially 'private individuals,' who convened to participate in the rational debates on crucial matters of shared importance and concern as the public is crucial for Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere.

through the interventions of Christian missionaries, as in any other part of India, significantly contributed to the emergence of Kerala's public sphere in several key ways. The social conditions that emerged along with the popularity of print created a discursive space where rational public debates were materialised, similar to the Habermasian conception of the rise of a bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century, parallel to the growth of coffee houses, literary and other societies, voluntary associations, and the growth of the press. It contributed to the rise of various social and political movements in Kerala, adopting print as a catalyst for mass mobilisation. The print materials were also appropriated to build counter public spheres by the missionaries, community reformers, and the Left intellectuals to advocate for social reforms, raise awareness among the masses, and thus contributed to broader social changes. In short, print facilitated social, cultural and literary development, facilitating social reforms and their integration into the sociocultural fabric of the region. With many people learning to read and access the new sources of information available with the spread of print technologies, various reading publics emerged in due time, with the common people engaging with texts and developing a critical and informed public sphere.

The Leftist movement adeptly leveraged the growing influence of the printing press to consolidate a public sphere, utilising it as a tool for ideological dissemination and mass mobilisation. The proliferation of newspapers, pamphlets, and literary journals became a crucial medium through which the Leftist intellectuals and writers articulated anti-colonial, anti-feudal, and socialist ideologies. By intertwining literary production with political activism, the print media was extensively used to shape public opinion, challenge dominant ideologies, and create a robust counter-public. All these played a significant role in mobilising diverse social groups, particularly the working class and the peasantry. Through this strategic appropriation of the print technology, the Left could influence Kerala's cultural and political discourse, thus consolidating a progressive and ideologically cohesive public sphere.

The Left-led library movement that gained momentum in the 1940s was one of the key initiatives towards the consolidation of a people's public sphere. It played

an important role in democratizing access to reading, particularly for the lower classes, by establishing public libraries across Kerala's villages and neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> In the mid-20th century, the library movement became a transformative force, promoting literacy and education regardless of social or economic background.<sup>16</sup> By making books and reading materials widely accessible, it fostered a culture of learning and critical thinking among the masses. The extensive circulation of newspapers and literary texts in Malayalam through these libraries was instrumental in embedding reading as a daily practice and shaping the intellectual landscape of the Malayali populace. The communities of newspaper readers formed around these libraries and reading rooms came to symbolise the collective consciousness of the masses in Kerala, ultimately transforming the act of reading newspapers into a prominent cultural marker of Malayali public life. Public libraries and reading rooms also served as vital community hubs and spaces for intellectual exchange, thus upholding the movement's legacy of empowering individuals and communities through knowledge. The libraries and reading rooms were crucial to building a left-oriented public sphere that manifested the progressive credentials of the newly emerged Malayali state. It was predominantly because these institutions challenged traditional caste hierarchies and power dynamics, primarily via the young peer groups from diverse communities congregated in these libraries, forging strong social bonds and engaging in collective reading activities, thereby developing social relationships.

The Left has historically positioned public libraries and reading rooms as progressive spaces that embody the rise of a new public sphere, challenging caste divisions while promoting egalitarianism through extensive social networks. These institutions are celebrated for fostering rational, progressive consciousness and contributing to Kerala's notable literacy rates. Public libraries are therefore viewed not only as tools for social and political activism but also as spaces that transcend

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<sup>17</sup> K.N. Panicker, was a prominent figure in the library movement in Kerala. He played a crucial role in promoting library services and advocating for public libraries as key institutions for education and social development. Panicker's efforts contributed significantly to the growth and accessibility of libraries in Kerala, making him a respected figure in the field of library science and education. His birthday is celebrated as Reading Day or *Vaayana Dinam* in Kerala in honour of his contributions. <sup>16</sup> While these libraries were found on the government funds, they were also funded by the royal patronage of the time.

traditional religious and social constraints, enabling democratic engagement. Through activities such as community reading programs and public lectures, libraries are seen as transformative agents, connecting individuals to political action. They are also upheld as enhancing civic participation through shaping the state's civil society and thus reinforcing its progressive public identity.

These libraries and reading rooms were, therefore, soon considered as public spheres, as intellectual spaces composed of citizen-led discourses and marked by a character of conversation, often local but revolving around social and political developments. Drawing parallels to the public spaces like coffee shops, salons, book clubs, art journals and magazines that led to the rise of the bourgeoisie public sphere in early modern Europe, the conversations in public libraries and reading rooms are regarded as key sites to evoke critical thinking on matters of society and politics while also critiquing the state apparatuses. In the Left narratives, the popularisation of reading by the libraries has been projected as vital to the rise of a progressive Malayali reading public, especially the newspaper-reading public. These narratives were mostly centred on the role of the library movement in promoting the public's critical thinking, thereby accelerating political action. Leftist narratives contend that in postcolonial Kerala, the library movements were instrumental in radicalising civil society and shaping the state's modernity through ensuring equal access to information. These public discourses thus fashioned the libraries and reading rooms as sites of rational ideas and enlightened civic engagements. At the core of the Left's political mobilisation through the library movement has been the popular base of libraries, which became viable to communicate communism at the grassroots level. However, the dominant literature on the library movements, especially the Left scholarship, focuses on how libraries developed and popularised public reason by

serving as local discursive spaces where local, regional and national issues are deliberated.<sup>18</sup>

These rigorous engagements with the domains of popular culture, which materialised in a national popular will, have been instrumental in enabling the communist party to mould a public sphere predicated upon a Left common sense. Along with the role in developmental politics through parliamentary democratic processes, the interventions of the social Left were soon shifted towards transforming the popular into rational, progressive spheres. These attempts were defined predominantly by the public discourses around realism and melodrama in which the social realist tradition of the Left's engagement with popular culture played a crucial role. This is where the interventions of many left-oriented progressive, rational movements manifest as crucial agents in consolidating the rational, progressive discourses predicated upon public reason around the Malayali public citizen.

### **The networks of public rationality**

The legitimacy of the public discourses on social realism in the cultural spheres is also manifested in the material public spheres. The organised interventions of the Left to solidify the discourses of public rationality were undertaken predominantly through turning secular rationality into a uniting element of the newly emerged Malayali state. The appropriation of the everyday social and cultural spaces as spheres of rational deliberations was one of the key interventions in this regard. Following this, the Left's imagination of a rational progressive public sphere was predicated on the informal, everyday social spaces, including local tea shops, public libraries, and affiliated reading rooms and their projections as signifiers of the state's progressive political consciousness.

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<sup>18</sup> They functioned not merely as public venues for reading but as sites for cultivating critical consciousness and awareness of people's rights, where even illiterate individuals attended public reading sessions. Common readings in libraries transformed the common public into more informed citizens.

## **Everyday spaces**

The Left's mobilisation of a people's public sphere was centred predominantly on the popular base of the everyday social spaces—such as local tea shops, public libraries, *kavalas*, and town squares. The populist interventions via these informal spaces that were converted into spaces for rational deliberation remained pivotal to the rational trajectory of mass mobilisation in Kerala. They were considered the face of new progressive social spaces of early twentieth-century Kerala, which marked a shift in social relations. As they transcended caste and religious boundaries that defined the social relationships during the time, these spaces were considered historically significant as embodying the rise of a modern public sphere. They were subsequently viewed as modern alternatives to traditional caste hierarchies and as key to the socialist base of the communist party in Kerala.

By the mid-twentieth century, the Left established a strong network of populist consolidations around village squares, local tea shops, public grounds, etc. These spaces for social gathering soon became informal yet vibrant hubs for political communication. They took the form of circles of male camaraderie, centred predominantly around local reading halls, where collective newspaper reading was a popular practice. These spaces were subsequently manifested as key political hubs, crucial in shaping public consciousness and reinforcing communist ideology. In many villages, the local tea shop acted as a "central office" for political activism and discussions while also serving as a gathering spot for updates on important social and political issues. Harikrishnan (2022) highlights how the substantial presence of coolie labourers made tea shops essential for communist leaders to engage with. As tea shops facilitated interaction across caste lines, they were projected as cosmopolitan spaces that transcended caste, religious divisions, and the spatial limitations defined by caste-based land relations. The populist consolidation around these spaces was led by trade unions affiliated with communist parties, arts and cultural movements, and forums dedicated to literature and science, all of which helped cultivate a modern, progressive consciousness among the common people. These everyday spaces thus became the focal points for disseminating communist ideology through theatre, music, pamphlets, lectures, and storytelling, supporting the Left's cultural campaigns to reshape the public consciousness of the masses, as

Mannathukaren (2021) observes. The Left's interventions in these spaces were closely tied to popular culture, with genres of song and theatre borrowing extensively from folk tradition to inculcate public rationality among the masses. While the communists' leveraging of both the lived and representational spaces as ideological sites to communicate communism to the masses materialised in the consolidations of a Left-leaning public sphere, they have been crucial to forming the rational trajectory of Kerala's public sphere.

### **People's Science Movement/ the Rational Movements**

*The Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad* (hereafter KSSP) is a prominent mass science movement dedicated to popularising science, while advancing scientific modernity through political engagements. Established in the early 1960s, KSSP has been one of the most organised efforts by the Left to promote scientific rationality among the common people of Kerala. Its primary aim has been to advocate for rational scientific thinking and technological education, with a special focus on the rural poor and marginalised communities. Embracing the slogan "science for social revolution," KSSP championed science as a tool to challenge feudalism, caste-based discrimination, religious obscurantism, and economic exploitation (Bijukumar 2019). Envisioned as a people's movement, it aimed to empower the masses by disseminating scientific knowledge, thus forming public opinions and enabling their active participation in the state's developmental processes.

The activities of KSSP were distinctly aligned with socialist ideals, particularly in its concerted efforts to reshape the values and lifestyles of the general populace through scientific reasoning. The organization's decentralised and democratic structure and participatory operational methods reinforced its identity as a people's movement, supported by an extensive network across Kerala and a wide range of initiatives designed to promote mass mobilisation through science. KSSP's dissemination of scientific knowledge through lectures, symposia, and publications, initially concentrated in urban spaces, was quickly expanded to rural areas by establishing Rural Science Forums. In these regions, science communication was primarily conducted through *science Jathas* (science marches), in which the elements of performing arts were effectively integrated to enhance public

engagement. Street plays, folk dances, and songs on scientific themes were incorporated into the science marches to engage the larger public and communicate scientific ideas in a more accessible and compelling manner. KSSP's interventions to propagate scientific education were predominantly shaped as pedagogic street culture. By combining rationalist politics and scientific thought with vernacular performance traditions, its modalities of communicating science to the masses diverged from the formal visual language of elite rationality. For example, the science marches conducted by the KPSC demonstrated a participatory visual culture through hand-painted placards, banners with slogans promoting scientific temper, portraits of scientists, models, exhibits, and the collective participation of teachers and students. It communicated scientific knowledge and communist ideology using familiar aesthetic idioms drawn from folk cultural forms. These initiatives promoted science as a shared cultural resource accessible at the grassroots level, even as they contributed to the construction of a hegemonic scientific rationality within the state's public sphere. These practices prioritised the mobilisation of spectators as active citizens and political subjects.

In addition, KSSP activists travelled across the state to deliver lectures on science at various locations. Bijukumar (2019) notes how the strong presence of organic intellectuals added a radical dimension to KSSP's activities, despite not being a frontal organisation of the communist parties, party members, loyalists, fellow travellers and activists involved in its organisational units and activities. The central tenet of KSSP has been the democratisation of knowledge, particularly disseminating scientific education to the grassroots level by removing it from the grasp of the elite. Its social and political engagement extended across diverse sectors, including literacy and education, health, environmental issues, and micro-level planning. Its mass education initiatives encompassed organising study sessions, science exhibitions, and quizzes; establishing science clubs for children; producing educational resources; and publishing science magazines and pamphlets. It also played a key role in advocating for alternative approaches to educational and curricular reforms while actively opposing corruption, privatisation, and the

commercialisation of education. Through investments in children's science periodicals such as *Eureka* and *Shastra Keralam*, and science fiction and educational magazines for school children, KSSP sought to cultivate scientific rationality among younger generations.

All these initiatives gave the movement a populist character, which contributed extensively to the discourses of forming a public sphere centred around scientific rationality. KSSP's focus on shaping public opinion across various domains—education, environment, ecology, health, resource management, consumer awareness, women's issues, national integration and so on—enabled it to emerge as a rational voice within Kerala's scientific public sphere. The social and political initiative of KSSP to propagate an alternative social framework infused with scientific principles is intended to demystify scientific knowledge and practices by translating abstract scientific rationality into public reasoning. All these materialised the communist project of building a public sphere through a progressive secular rationality. Their activism was therefore grounded in the vision of an egalitarian society, where the emancipatory potential of science and technology was emphasised, alongside a rejection of capitalist production and wealth accumulation. Bijukumar(2019) notes that the interventions of KSSP to form public opinions upon a secular rationality and efforts to fight social bondages created by traditional values were undertaken in the framework of Marxist modernity (Bijukumar 2019).

Its political action, aimed at democratising knowledge by rejecting modern science's technocratic rationalism, has been central to constructing the public discourses of a scientific public sphere in Kerala. By fostering 'scientific citizens' through its mass projects of popularising science, KSSP positioned itself as a rational interlocutor within the progressive developmental politics of the new modern Malayali state. Varughese (2018) illustrates how KSSP's activism on environmental issues helped redraw the relationship between ecological self and individual self, culminating in the conception of ecological citizenship, establishing a symbiotic relationship between human beings and non-human beings. KSSP has been at the forefront of generating massive campaigns for civic action, community development, and

cooperation. The popular narratives on Kerala standing apart from other Indian societies, where conservatism and obscurantism often overshadow public reasoning, are often accredited to the prevalence of such public discourse fostered by initiatives like those of KSSP.

The widespread support that KSSP garnered for advocating the emancipatory potential of science and technology, pivotal in challenging both capitalist modes of production and the accumulation of wealth, and the ‘irrational’ constructs of religion and caste, played a critical role in fostering a scientific temperament around the public sphere. However, KSSP fostered strong public opinions against religious and community-mobilised uprisings, viewing them as markers of obscurantism that undermined the rational, progressive face of the developmental state. By integrating social activism with efforts to raise public awareness, KSSP sought to challenge religious orthodoxy, societal conservatism, and obscurantism, framing these as antithetical to the progressive, rational sensibility of the modern Malayali nation-state. All these played a significant role in shaping the Left's vision of a rational public, positioning KSSP as the core of the newly formed Malayali state and the face of its progressive, secular public sphere. This dynamic, while claiming to embed the vision of a modern, egalitarian state, led to the tension between melodrama and realism, manifesting in the dominance of realism as the primary mode of engagement. This vision, rooted in rationally mediated citizen publics, was shaped by a surge in mass consciousness driven by various progressive movements, clearly alienating the discourses of melodrama as an irrational counterpart to the developmental aesthetics of the state.

### **Melodrama versus realism**

The discourses of public rationality formulated around the aforementioned interventions reinforced that the state's public sphere is grounded in public reason and the rational, progressive credentials of its developmental modernity. A substantial body of scholarly and popular discourses on the public sphere of Kerala is thus anchored in its rational landscapes, encompassing progressive politics, strong developmental matrices, and active civil society and their supposed translations into

the state's developmental modernity. These progressive premises are mounted upon the popular narratives, Left historiographies, and academic scholarship that trace the trajectory of a public sphere through the active participation of the citizen public in political processes (Bijukumar 2007; Nair 2003). The rational claims tied to a politically active citizenry are often attributed to a long history of public rationality stemming from Leftist interventions in the state, fostering grassroots movements and civil society organisations that contributed to the progressive public consciousness. These discourses materialised in the historical tension between melodrama and realism, with realism ultimately emerging as the privileged mode of cultural address. The privileging of public reason and a scientific temperament within Kerala's public sphere posited various forms of melodramatic public behaviours as contrasting with the progressive sensibilities that have historically fashioned its public sphere. This has been undertaken by marking certain affective behaviours, particularly the melodramatic public cultures, both in the material spheres and in the cultural industries, as the irrational counterpart to the realistic sensibility that distinguishes the state's public sphere. Punathil (2013) shows how the non-interference of 'primordial' forces such as religion and caste—mainly due to Left political interventions in Kerala—is considered the primary factor in forming a rational public sphere. He illustrates two assumptions that underlie this view: 1) it assumes that a critical, rational public sphere can be made possible only by eliminating the presence of religion and caste from the public sphere 2) it also assumes that the public sphere of Kerala was developed as a result of critical and rational debates where religion and caste were absent in all senses, one of the major factors accounted for social development (ibid). This public rationality entrenched as a Left common sense became integral to the cultural identity of the state. It is mounted upon the plank of public reason, with the rational credentials around Kerala's public sphere projected as key to the progressive self-definition of the Malayali public. It is legitimised through the cultural authenticity of realism in the state, which is grounded in the realist imagination of the public sphere as a domain for rational deliberation and its distancing from melodrama.

These attempts in privileging realism could also be seen within a broader national context where the Indian state invested heavily in the rationalization of the popular culture in post independent India. In the 1950s and 1960s, these interventions were undertaken predominantly through sustained efforts to adopt mediums of mass communication towards the aspirations for nation building. In the decades following India's independence from colonial rule, the primacy accorded to realism both as an aesthetic and pedagogic tool by the Indian state was part of the attempts to align the cultural production with the imperatives of the nation building. During the Nehruvian period, realism was imagined as a medium to propagate rationality, manifested primarily through the appropriation of mass media for social documentation, and civic instruction. These interventions were undertaken predominantly through institutions such as the Films Division, via documentaries, news reels and feature films which focused on the themes of industrial progress, agrarian reform, public health and national integration. They emphasized on the didactic functions of mass media towards the developmental modernity of the nation, establishing realism as the aesthetic counterpart of the state's development politics. It subsequently materialized in the widespread discontents with melodrama as sites of commercial entertainment and ideological condescension for its privileging of spectacles and affective modes of narrations.

Apart from the interventions via Film Divisions of India, the investments in rationalized popular culture were carried out also through various broadcasting policies, particularly via the early programming ethos of the All India Radio and Door darshan, which discarded melodrama for its affective excesses. Door darshan's temporary ban or restriction of film songs resulted from the apprehension that the focus on entertainment programs would distract the didactic or pedagogical functions of media. Subsequently its programming prioritized instructional broadcasts, classical arts, rural uplift narratives and socially purposeful dramas that aligned with the pedagogical and moral objectives of the state. Together, these interventions revealed a national picture of adopting realism as a tool for cultural governance where the state employed significant efforts in shaping the contours of

popular cultures to align with the nationalist aspirations, revealing its broader national dimensions.

In Kerala, however, this project began as early as the 1930s, much before the post independent Indian state's interventions to rationalize popular culture and it unfolded over a much longer historical trajectory. Significantly, it was driven by the Left cultural interventions that sought to transform the spheres of popular culture into sites of a Left rationality through diverse networks of public rationality. However, over time, particularly by the 1970s, these initiatives were increasingly institutionalised by the state. It was manifested primarily through extensive public funding for the parallel cinema movement and film society movement which came to represent the progressive face of Malayalam cinema. The parallel cinema movement emerged as a realist, non-commercial and politically conscious film movement with key figures like Adoor Gopala Krishnan and G. Aravindan in the late 1960s and 1970s. The focus of the films under this movement on social issues, artistic expressions and material realities of the time, influenced by the Italian neorealism and Film society movements across the world was juxtaposed to the spectacle in commercial cinema and its appeal for a mass audience. This juxtaposition engendered the hierarchical contest between parallel cinema, as the site of artistic seriousness and social critique, while commercial cinema being relegated to popular entertainment and mass consumerism. Similarly, the new mode of spectatorship that the film society movement cultivated through the exhibitions of international realist cinemas across Kerala and critical discourses around films that privileged everyday social experiences and political intelligibility was hailed as the markers of the aesthetic distinctions of Malayali spectators. The critical discourses built around the pedagogical practices of film screening, film appreciation, discussion, and criticism etc. also contributed to the delegitimizing of melodrama during the time.

These rational credentials around Malayalam cinema and its spectators are also formed by differentiating its cultural industries from those of other South Indian states, particularly Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and the populist idioms of their mass cinema. The realist identity of Malayalam cinema was primarily constructed on the predominance of social realism in contrast to the mythological, stunt-driven, or

romantic melodramas that dominated Indian cinema. The dominance of social realist films, which were often adapted from canonical literary works, reinforced Malayalam cinema's status as a bastion of social realism. As a result, the melodramatic acting styles of various Malayalam actors in popular melodramas were dismissed, viewed as embodying the exaggerated emotions characteristic of romance melodramas. This was further amplified by the rise of parallel cinema, which came to be regarded as the golden era of realist filmmaking.

This distinction continued to emphasise the dominance of social realism in Malayalam cinema, presenting it as a medium through which the developmental aesthetics of the state are embodied. As a result, this has led to a condescending view of the populist politics in these states, which are projected as shaped by the affective economies of melodrama. Following this, realism in Malayalam cinema was not only embraced as a tool of the developmental state but also emerged as a dominant aesthetic. It was promoted as a privileged mode of film production, celebrated for its superior literary and cultural sensibility. The success of art films or parallel cinema in Kerala, along with the recognition of realist filmmakers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, John Abraham, and M.T. Vasudevan Nair both nationally and internationally, bolstered the legitimacy of realism in the region, which in turn cast aside melodrama. The rise of film societies across Kerala, showcasing arthouse cinema and gaining popularity among the masses, contributed to the progressive image of realism in Malayalam cinema, positioning it as a distinctive characteristic that set it apart from the perceived irrationality of neighboring states.

However, the distinction between realism and melodrama has always been fluid, as seen in how it was blurred even in the highly celebrated social realist model of Malayalam cinema. Social realist films employed melodrama as their narrative structure while focusing on realist themes. Early Left political melodramas, with their portrayal of the communist hero as a catalyst for social change, played a crucial role in shaping the popular cultural domain in Kerala. The blurring of this distinction was crucial for the Left to keep the domain of the popular intact and sustain its imaginaries of the national popular. Similarly, Radhakrishnan (2010) argues that the

existence of the Left in Kerala, like the structures of the political in Tamil Nadu, exceeds the limits of the rational political public as it makes itself visible in modern Kerala. An invisible domain of beliefs, irrational structures of knowledge, fandom, rituals and practices remains the central structure within which the politics of rationality is played out. This allows for the Communist Party to exercise complete hegemony in spheres outside parliamentary politics even when they are not triumphant in the elections (Radhakrishnan 2010:41). What emerges from Radhakrishnan's formulation of the question of the popular domain in Kerala is that the role that cinematic populism played in other parts of South India, for instance, has been performed by the structures of the political that the Left in Kerala engendered (Muhammed 2017). The blurring of this distinction was essential for the Left to maintain control over the domain of the popular and the institutions that mobilized political will, helping to sustain its vision of the national popular.

The next section will show how the progressive credentials ascribed to Kerala's rational modernity came under scrutiny by the 1980's with the emergence of a body of academic scholarship called critiques of Kerala modernity. I will analyse these counter narratives in parallel to the declining legitimacy of rationality in Kerala with the emergence of various new media generated public spheres.

### **The discontents of Kerala modernity**

A key factor frequently attributed to the Left's dominance in the state is its involvement in Kerala's transition to modernity, a process encapsulated by the term "Kerala modernity". While reflecting the state's distinctive experiences with modernity from a regional perspective, this term is often associated with the Left's pivotal role in shaping the state's development trajectory. As a result, in the dominant discourses, Kerala modernity has been defined as largely shaped by progressive political ideologies, primarily those of the Left, that emphasised social justice, and equitable development. Kerala's modernity is thus argued to be marked by a unique progressive trajectory, characterised by its socio-political achievements and an active public sphere shaped by the Left's cultural and political mobilisations.

This has led to the characterisation of the state as a model of development that successfully navigated the transition to modernity.

The establishment of the state in 1956 marked a key moment in Kerala's modernisation process, solidifying the state's role in social development. This was further reinforced when the first communist government came to power in 1957, leading to a shift in the social dynamics, particularly through land redistribution. The implementation of the Land Reforms Act, spearheaded by the communist government, transformed landownership patterns, enabling the newly mobile communities to acquire land. The reforms, which granted cultivating tenants ownership rights and homestead rights to squatters, are often regarded as a "model" of redistributive land reform. Kerala's land reform initiatives have been widely celebrated as a successful example that has availed the 'land to the tiller' and are projected as central to the Left's broader agenda of social justice and strengthening of rural political power.

By the mid-1970s, Kerala was increasingly recognised as a model of social development, where significant improvements in indicators like declining birth and infant mortality rates, life expectancy nearing seventy years, widespread literacy, and a notable gender balance were achieved. The "Kerala model" emerged as a unique approach to human development, prioritizing education, healthcare, and social welfare, despite relatively low economic growth. It gained widespread acclaim for its remarkable outcomes, such as high literacy rates, extended life expectancy, and reduced poverty, demonstrating significant improvements in social indicators and quality of life. Kerala's progressive reputation is largely ascribed to this economic framework and its translations into the progressive attributes of the state's public sphere. By presenting the model central to Leftist social welfare policies and development politics and asserting its impact on the progressive political sensibilities of the general public, the Left political tradition established itself as a formidable force in parliamentary politics. This approach, emphasizing public action, social mobilisation, and human development, is viewed as a defining element of Kerala's progressive public consciousness.

In the dominant development literature on Kerala and the Leftist historical narratives, both these development models are regarded as central to the Left's developmental politics, which is rooted in progressive social welfare. However, by the 1980s, the celebratory accounts of this developmental trajectory and their role in Kerala modernity faced significant criticisms. These discontents were formed largely around the persistent inequalities and social exclusions that marked Kerala's modernity. Dalit critiques highlight how the Left narrative of Kerala's development exceptionalism has overlooked the complexities and contradictions inherent in the state's modernisation process.<sup>19</sup> Devika (2010) argues that the dominant Left in Kerala has often subsumed the question of caste within the broader framework of class struggle, thereby overlooking the specificities of caste oppression.<sup>20</sup> It was also highlighted that the main beneficiaries of the abolition of landlordism through the Land reform Bills have been wealthy peasants rather than poor peasants or agricultural labourers (Herring 1980). These criticisms, while locating the disjuncture between land reforms and equity in land ownership, reveal that Kerala's land reforms have failed to provide sufficient land to the actual tillers of the soil, with the slave castes and the scheduled castes continuing to rank at the bottom in land ownership. The Dalit criticisms of Kerala modernity also contend that the Left's dominance in Kerala has fostered a discursive environment where caste is often treated as secondary, side-lining the material concerns and experiences of Dalits.

The dominant Left narratives on Kerala modernity have also been criticised for treating modernity as a singular and unified experience, thereby overlooking the multiplicities and complexities of modernity as an embodied experience. These critiques highlight how Kerala's long colonial history turns its engagement with modernity multifaceted and complex. Bose and Varughese's *Kerala Modernity:*

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<sup>19</sup> The representations of space in traditional caste society were the exclusive privilege of the upper castes as they conceived and controlled it. In his book *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against caste inequality in Colonial Kerala*, Mohan maps out how the absolute control over space in the caste order that denied freedom to the slave castes was accomplished by exerting control over their spatial mobility. The slave castes' experiences of the immutability of their spatial conditions were defined primarily by their confinement to the areas where they resided, often on the edges of rice fields or the boundaries of the landlords' farms.

<sup>20</sup> The unequal land relations and access to public spaces were manifested in many discriminatory practices based on caste, including untouchability and unseeability, a practice in which members of certain castes should not come within sight of any member of the upper caste. The highest-status groups, the Namboodiris and Nairs, forced the lower caste members to display servility in many ways, while lower groups, in turn, exacted similar marks of respect from others who were held to be lower than themselves. The caste system dictated the choice of one's occupation and sustenance, the houses one could build, and even the clothes one could wear.

*Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition* (2015) delineates the need to consider the multiple "spacetimes" of the region to fully understand the complexities of Kerala's modernity. They point out the significance of the concept of 'region' as a discursive category to analyse Kerala's regional modernity, moving beyond the Eurocentric frameworks of modernity and the dominant narrative of the 'Malayalee modernity'. A close analysis of the ideas, spaces, and practices that intricately shape the region's unique experiences of modernity is crucial to their analysis of Kerala modernity.

Also, the community-centred critiques of Kerala modernity challenge the Left's role in shaping the public sphere, highlighting the contributions of community leaders and religious reformers in the Kerala Renaissance. These criticisms assert that Kerala's modernity/ renaissance is marked by the intense churning within communities and anti-caste consciousness as against the Left narratives of a secular rationality defining Kerala's modernist trajectory.<sup>21</sup> They illustrate the role of community reformers and leaders like Sri Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Chattampi Swamikal, and other religious leaders in shaping the public sphere of Kerala and in navigating Kerala's modernity. Govinda Pillai (2004) observes that the distinctiveness of the Kerala Renaissance/modernity has been its strong footing in the subaltern section of the society.

Alongside these academic literatures on the critiques of Kerala modernity, the cultural, economic, and political mobility gained by various minority communities also led to the emergence of various counter-publics that contest the dominant narratives on the economic model that is claimed to have shaped the Malayali modernity. These critiques highlight how the economic and cultural mobility of these communities was largely the result of mass migration to the Arabian Gulf, which engendered significant improvements in their living standards. They exposed how the financial underpinning of the celebrated Kerala social

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<sup>21</sup> Against this historical context of structural inequalities, a series of revolts against the caste system, protesting over a range of issues such as the sartorial codes (the Channar Revolt), access to public roads, which were denied to the outcastes (agricultural strike by Ayyankali) and so on, emerged in the nineteenth century. These mobilisations under the leadership of various political and community leaders, such as Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, K. P. Karuppan et al., were marked by the intense churning within communities, anti-caste consciousness family reform, and the end of the matrilineal system, signalling the arrival of the modern familial structure represented by the figure of the father and son. While these uprisings in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were the counter responses to the hierarchical nature of the public sphere and its exclusionary practices, they also paved the way for the rise of many counter-publics.

development model largely relied on remittances from Malayalee expatriates (Jeffrey 1992). These discontents were reinforced by criticisms from Dalit and minority groups, who argued that the focus on social indicators obscured Kerala's underlying economic inequalities, including the lack of substantial local industrial development and socio-economic disparities, which exacerbated the marginalisation of these communities. They also highlighted the role of various caste- and community-based reform movements in advancing their social status while asserting that the model's perceived success largely depended on the contributions of marginalised communities, particularly remittances from expatriates, including Muslims and lower-caste men from the Persian Gulf.

Gender critiques emphasise that Kerala modernity has largely been undertaken as an upper-caste male endeavour, with upper-caste men holding dominant roles in key progressive movements and mass cultural initiatives. Devika and Sukumaran (2006) examine the unequal access and restricted involvement of women in the Library Movement, which is celebrated as vital to developing a progressive Malayali public that shaped Kerala's modernity. Their analysis demonstrates how the movement largely functioned as a conduit of male friendship, reinforcing gendered inequalities.

Varughese examines the consolidation of media-generated scientific public spheres, particularly around newspapers during the times of environmental crisis, a role later taken over by television and new media platforms. He argues that the emergence of citizen-centric public spheres, which became prominent in Kerala during the 1990s in response to various ecological risks and environmental crises, eroded the belief that "people-centric science" could effectively address issues in science and technology-related decision-making, a stance previously championed by the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP). Varughese further highlights the political nature of the media-generated public spheres within regional media, which have facilitated public engagement with science and created a new space for political deliberation. This shift has led to a reduction in the KSSP's role as the primary rational interlocutor of scientific knowledge in the state.

Along with these counter discourses on Kerala modernity, by the 1980's the discourses on public rationality started declining remarkably in Kerala. This was manifested most evidently through the decline of the public legitimacy of *Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad*'(KSSP)s interventions to propagate scientific rationality especially in the backdrop of newspapers being the locus of public deliberations with science by the late 1970's. These deliberative public spheres formed around newspapers against the backdrop of various environmental crisis in Kerala replaced KSSP who remained the conduit of Malayali's public engagements with science. These changes were engendered primarily in correspondence to the emergence of new public spheres, strongly supported by a new media ecosystem characterised by a growing emphasis on visual spectacles, in contrast to the realist aesthetics that have traditionally been celebrated as guiding forces in Malayali public life. In Malayalam cinema, the privileging of realism associated with the parallel cinema movement lost its currency by the late 1980s. For example, the rise of low budget soft-porn films focusing on erotic spectacles and sensationalism by the late 1980's, corresponding to the economic crisis in the state engendered a massive shift from the realist aesthetics of parallel cinema. It was followed by the emergence of *laughter films* in the 90's, low-budget, comedy-driven films depicting the everyday struggles of unemployed youth for livelihood that prioritized slapstick, parody, and episodic humor over narrative restraint, and rational engagement.

The delegitimacy of the discourses of rationality in the public sphere are also shaped by the economic and political mobility gained by various minority community groups who brought in their identarian discourses to the public sphere via their newly acquired cultural agency. The ownership of various community groups and political establishments played a crucial role in this regard. The emergence of new actors thus marked a significant shift in the custodianship of the public sphere, manifesting a rupture in earlier efforts to curate and regulate it. This transformation was further enabled by the emergence of a vibrant visual media economy in the state by the 2000s, driven by the proliferation of satellite television and an expanding convergence culture in digital intermediaries that extensively mobilised upon affective spectacle and live transmission. I locate the eruption of the

affective intensities of mourning publics and their mediated cultural forms within this peculiar political, cultural and media contexts and their implications for the configurations of public rationality in the state.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has set the premise for my study on the affective formations around mass grieving as critical sites of Kerala's negotiations with melodrama and its cultural politics. The following chapters on mass grief during celebrity funerals, political martyrdoms and mourning films will explicate the visual cultural dynamics of the diverse mourning publics and their reconfigurations of the rational enclosures around the public sphere. Outlining a trajectory of the discourses of public rationality and their disruptions in the state thus enables me to contextualise my enquiries on how melodrama emerges as a key mode of address in Kerala, situating it within the cultural politics of mass participation in South India/South Asia in general. The chapter thus sets the ground for the thesis's enquiry into how melodrama has been negotiated/ accommodated in the public domain by the state or other machinery as a cultural counterbalance to the 'rational' Malayali public sphere. The next chapter examines an affective media economy built upon the visceral intensities of a monumental public at celebrity funerals in Kerala. I will analyse how this cultural economy of mass grief and its mediatization unravels how media, political parties and state negotiate with the affective valences of the performative spectacles at celebrity funerals.

## Chapter 2

### **Mediatization via Mourning and Vice Versa: Television, Mass Grief, and Liveness in Kerala**

This chapter engages with the corporeal and mediated intensities of mourning publics at celebrity funerals in Kerala, attended both in person and via TV and other live-streaming platforms. It analyses how live coverage transforms discrete emotional valences of these events into monumental media spectacles, consolidating an affective economy of grief based on the expression of “liveness” in all its urgency. This urgent expression results from the historical transition from traditional to new media in digital environments over the last two decades. The chapter establishes that the spectacles of “liveness” are key to understanding the cultural dynamics of mass participation in Kerala, which often abjures the general South Indian public’s enthusiasm for celebrities. Furthermore, it examines how emotional eruptions at mass funeral processions form a melodramatic counterbalance to the “rational,” realist Malayali public sphere, which is proved, by such displays, to be an inadequate lens for viewing cultural self-definition within popular discourses in Kerala.

In 2004, Kairali TV, a Malayalam-language general-entertainment television channel owned by Kairali TV Network and the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI (M)) in Kerala, live telecast the sixhundred-kilometres-long funeral procession of E. K. Nayanar, a popular leader of CPI (M).<sup>22</sup> E.K Nayanar, one of the longest serving chief ministers of Kerala and a stalwart of communist Party had a remarkable popularity among the party workers as well as the common masses. Apart from his political identity as a staunch communist leader, the massive popularity derived from his reputation as a charming speaker and witty political entertainer. The respect and affection he earned among the ordinary people of Kerala across diverse political affiliations as well as the communist party workers manifested in a monumental public attendance at his funeral in 2004 across the streets of Kerala while his dead body was taken back home. Kairali channel covered his funeral procession from Thiruvananthapuram to Kannur to reach the designated

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<sup>22</sup> Nayanar died in 2004, at age 85, at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi following heart failure.

resting place, with the dead body kept in a glass coffin covered by a communist party flag in a Kerala state transport bus, and accompanied by thousands of people. The time of Nayanar's demise coincided with a significant shift, marked by the rise of satellite channels and the Indian government's new permission to directly uplink programs from within the country.<sup>23</sup> The channel team and officials of Kairali TV, who accompanied Nayanar's funeral procession, documented and aired the emotional responses of thousands of Communist Party leaders, workers, followers, and ordinary citizens across the route.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the general Malayali audience and the political public, the main audience for the live broadcast was the Malayali diaspora, particularly in the Gulf.<sup>25</sup> The live streaming afforded them a sense of ceremonial participation in the occasion. Kairali's extensive live broadcasting of Nayanar's funeral procession inaugurated a popular media practice in the state; it turned certain public figures' funerals into grand televisual spectacles.

B. R. P. Bhaskar (2009), a noted journalist, also points out that, since Nayanar's funeral procession, the families of many distinguished Keralites who have lived and died outside Kerala have come under official and public pressure to allow the bodies to be brought home for a funeral with state adulations. Citing cartoonist OV Vijayan and composer G Devarajan as examples, Bhaskar identifies the compulsions that demand that the body be brought home to receive celebratory funerals in places they had left early in life. Similarly, the state of Kerala made arrangements to bring the mortal remains of Kamala Suraiyya (Kamala Das), the prominent Indian writer in English and a celebrated author in Malayalam from Pune, where she lived with her son, to Thiruvananthapuram for burial. The state also organised an opportunity for the public to pay their tributes at the Kerala Sahithya Akademi in Thrissur, where the crowd showered her with massive adulation. For

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<sup>23</sup> The live transmission of Kerala's first chief minister E.M.S. Namboothirippad's funeral by Asianet in 1998 was available only to the viewers in Thiruvanthapuram city circulated by cable TV networks, due to the absence of facilities for uplinking from India during the time.

<sup>24</sup> The focus of the voice over in the channel's live telecast was on how the respect and affection he earned among the people of Kerala was manifested through thousands of people who waited all across Kerala to bid him adieu.

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<sup>25</sup> By the late 1990s, Gulf Malayali had become a significant driving force for the satellite TV industry.

those who could not take part in/ witness her 300 km long funeral procession from Thrissur to Thiruvanthapuram. The events were covered live on most state television channels.

The death and funeral of a public figure, whether a monarch or a statesperson and the emotional responses exhibited by their subjects, constitute a site of public interest due to the spread of recording devices. This chapter focuses on the monumentality of the mourning public at the funerals of public figures in Kerala and their emotional valences, which have turned into media extravaganzas post2000s. By critically engaging with the funerals of Kalabhavan Mani, an actor; Panakkad Sayed Hyder Ali Shihab Thangal, a spiritual leader; and Oomen Chandy, a political leader, both in terms of the massive crowd physically present as well the coverage of the funerals on live television, I offer a line of argumentation for the importance of the corporeal and mediated intensities of public emotion for the state.

Over a decade after Nayanar's death, the 2016 funeral of Kalabhavan Mani (hereafter Mani), a popular Malayalam actor and singer, saw a congregation of tens of thousands of mourners and garnered remarkable media attention (See Figure 1). Kalabhavan Mani is a popular Malayalam actor who gained massive popularity for both his cinematic roles and his stage performances as a folk song singer. The extensive media coverage of Mani's funeral was shaped by a highly competitive and dynamic television landscape that developed in Kerala as the first decade of the century drew to a close, marking a stark contrast to the media environment surrounding the deaths of Nayanar. The emergence of a vibrant news television industry, the expansion of satellite television, and their convergence with internet driven media and platforms like YouTube were central to the state's media landscape during this period. Mani's funeral was broadcast live on nearly all major Malayalam TV channels, including Manorama News, Mathrubhumi News, Media One, and Jai Hind TV, and was also streamed live on their respective YouTube channels. The coverage began at the Thrissur Medical College, where Mani had passed away, and continued with live streaming of the emotional reactions of the public, tributes from

various public figures at different locations, and the family's private moments during the cremation at his residence (See Figure 2).<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 1:** The crowd waits for the ambulance carrying Mani's mortal remains to arrive in Chalakkudy. Source: Mathrubhoomi Channel archive



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<sup>26</sup> The live streaming began with the crowd gathered around the hospital premises, with handheld cameras capturing the difficulty in moving Mani's dead body to the ambulance. These visuals were broadcast repeatedly, accompanied by voice-overs from anchors seeking updates on arrangements for public tributes and the funeral. The live streaming spanned across the Thrissur Sangeetha Nadaka Academy and the Chalakkudy Municipal Hall, where his mortal remains were kept for public viewing, and his residence in Chalakkudy, where he was later cremated. Reporters at each location documented tributes from the public, film personalities, and political leaders, along with emotional reactions from family and relatives. The broadcasts emphasised the massive crowds at each venue and frequently noted police interventions to manage the gatherings.

**Figure 2:** A still from *Manorama News*'s live stream of Mani's funeral in Chalakkudy, captioned *Oru Nokku Kaanan Jana Sagaram* – "a sea of people gathered for a final glimpse of Mani". screenshot from Manorma News's live coverage available in YouTube.

Similarly, the spectacular turnout in the 2022 funeral procession of Panakkad Hyder Ali Shihab Thangal (hereafter Thangal), a reputable politician who served as the state president of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), Kerala's third-largest political party, and a highly revered Muslim spiritual leader, garnered a massive display of public affect that spammed the television screens and social media for days. During fieldwork conducted in Areekode, Malappuram district, a middle-aged man recalled his experience of attending Thangal's funeral at his residence, Kodappanakkal Tharavad. He described how Malappuram town transformed into a sea of people, with hundreds lining and jamming the roads of Panakkad as they awaited the arrival of Thangal's mortal remains on the afternoon of March 6, 2022, shortly after news of his death broke on television. He recounted that the news was deeply distressing and emotionally overwhelming for many in the locality. As soon as the death was announced on television channels, neighbours informed one another, and discussions quickly began about how to reach Panakkad before the body arrived. He noted that many among them were staunch followers of the IUML and Sunni Muslim who regarded Thangal as their spiritual leader who were eager to reach the residence early, anticipating that the town would soon be swamped with people arriving from across Kerala. He recounted how he and five others travelled together in a friend's car as early as possible. He remembered that it was not just them but several people from their locality also made arrangements to attend the funeral. In addition, party-assigned vehicles were organised to transport supporters who wished to be present in the funeral gathering. Many from his area availed themselves of this facility, as they believed that relying solely on public transportation might hinder their chance to finally see and pay respects to their beloved political and spiritual leader.

Almost all the Malayalam channels started the live coverage from the hospital where Thangal died, where many party leaders and followers gathered. On split screens, the channel live telecasted the police struggling to maintain order as people flocked to the streets and roads to bid an emotional adieu. The multiple

cameras placed at different corners captured the main gate of the pavilion in Malappuram Town Hall, where his body was kept for public view, collapsing as it was overcrowded, while the reporters joined live from these spots. The viewers were informed about the grief-stricken people in a kilometres-long queue to get a glimpse of the dead body, the senior leaders of the Muslim League pleading to the restive crowd to show restraint, and people crying out about their inability to pay final respects to their beloved leader. At *Kodappanakkal tharavad*, his residence, Media One telecasted the bereaved people wailing, sobbing, and reciting prayers along with the self-appointed volunteers struggling to control the throngs desperate to see Thangal's dead body. Meanwhile, scores of people, predominantly Muslims and party followers across Kerala, watched live the state honours given by Kerala police, the last round of the funeral prayer attended by several Muslim scholars and party leaders, and the body being laid to rest in Panakkad Jama Masjid even at midnight.

Although most prominent Malayalam channels telecast the funeral of Thangal, Media One TV, owned and run by the Kerala unit of *Jamaat-e-Islami Hind* and one of the few Indian news channels owned by an Islamic organization, telecast the events live for two consecutive days.<sup>27</sup> In a breaking news bulletin around 2:00 p.m. on March 6, 2022, the channel announced the death of Thangal. It started the live coverage from the hospital where he died, where many party leaders and followers gathered soon after the news was released. The channel livecasted the emotional responses of a colossal mourning public until his mortal remains were laid to rest, while on split screens, the police struggled to maintain order as people crowded the streets (See Figure 3). Many party workers of the Indian Union Muslim League from the Gulf countries publicly commended Media One channel on Facebook, tagging the reporters behind the extensive live coverage of Thangal's final journey, and expressed that the live stream provided them with a sense of ceremonial

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<sup>27</sup> The channel run by Madhyamam Broadcasting Development is the visual media venture of the Madhyamam Daily, a leading Malayalam newspaper with a significant Muslim readership. Media One chose to live telecast the events following Thangal's death for two consecutive days chiefly because of the widespread recognition of Thangal as a spiritual leader among Muslims in Kerala, coupled with the innate popularity surrounding his persona. As the stream of people visiting his residence continued even the day after his burial, Media One extended its coverage, broadcasting visits by religious and political leaders, as well as emotional recollections shared by ordinary people who cherished their memories with him.

participation in the event, despite their physical absence. Thanking Mujeeb Rahman and Saifu, the reporters, and the team of Media One for the live coverage of the funeral of Thangal, Husni Chullippara, a Facebook user, posted on his wall as: “Thank you, Media One, for live-streaming the funeral of Aattaappoo<sup>28</sup>. It benefited thousands of us who could not directly visit and pay homage, especially for the expatriates, the Gulf migrants. Thank you for the live coverage of the final journey of our beloved leader, without any interruptions, while other channels moved on to the usual news hours, even before the funeral was announced”.

During fieldwork, a 36-year-old Muslim woman from Keezhuparamba in Malappuram district, a homemaker, explained that she chose to watch Thangal’s funeral live on television rather than attend in person. She stated that this decision was in response to a religious principle that discourages women from viewing the mortal remains of men who are not family members or relatives. She vindicated this choice as an act of respect toward the Thangal family, whom she revered as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Abiding by this belief, she watched the live telecast at her home along with several women from her neighbourhood, many of whom were elderly. Although most of them owned television sets and had access to the live broadcast on mobile phones, they preferred to watch it collectively. She and her sister recalled the moment as deeply emotional, noting that many women present wept while watching Thangal being laid to rest. When asked whether witnessing the emotional expressions of people on television affected their own emotional responses, she remarked that seeing people from different religions and regions crying openly on camera was profoundly moving. She reflected that this shared display of grief created a sense of collective mourning, as if everyone was united in grieving the loss of their beloved Thangal.

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<sup>28</sup> Thangal was fondly called as Attappoo among those who followed him as a spiritual and political leader.



**Figure 3:** A still from *Media One*'s live streaming of Thangal's mortal remains being laid to rest in Panakkad Jama Masjid at midnight on March 6, 2022.

Exceeding these public turnout and broadcast events, the emotional outpouring and the media coverage of the former chief minister and one of the most popular leaders of the Indian National Congress, Oommen Chandy in 2023, was unprecedented. According to the programme initially announced by the Congress leadership and Chandy's family, the funeral procession was scheduled to begin at 7 a.m. from his residence in Thiruvananthapuram, and reach his hometown Puthuppally in Kottayam district by Wednesday evening. However, unprecedented crowds gathered along the entire route to pay their last respects, significantly slowing the movement of the cortege and delaying the procession by nearly a full day. Although the distance would normally have been covered in three to four hours, the nearly 150-kilometre journey was considerably slowed by the massive crowds of mourners lining the procession route to pay their final respects. At several points, the cortege was halted for extended periods to allow people a brief glimpse of their beloved leader. After reaching Kottayam, the mortal remains were kept at Thirunakkara Ground, where a large crowd had been waiting patiently since Wednesday night to offer tributes. When the body was carried onto the stage by party workers, the crowd filled the air with slogans such as “Kanne, Karalee, Kunjunju<sup>29</sup>” and “He has not died; he lives in us.”

<sup>29</sup> chandy was fondly addressed as Kunjoonj in Kerala politics.

Almost all prominent Malayalam TV channels, including DD Malayalam, live-telecast his funeral for three days. However, Manorama News, a channel that has been widely identified as politically inclined to Indian National Congress live covered the events consequently for seventy-two hours until he was laid to rest. An even bigger audience watched the procession live on television, and the event was also trending on news websites. The live telecast commenced with the announcement of Chandy's passing through his son's Facebook post, revealing that he had succumbed to cancer, and continued telecasting the emotional responses to his death for three days, marking a grand spectacle both in the cultural and media memory of the state.

As a breaking news flash, the animated text announcing his demise scrolled across channels, while significant milestones in his political career, ministerial roles, and major developmental projects of his tenure were showcased using old video footage and archival images. Interestingly, the live coverage began prior to the arrival of his mortal remains back home, with the news anchor continuously reporting on the family's and party leaders' efforts to bring him back to Thiruvananthapuram from Bangalore, where he died. Nevertheless, once his body arrived, the attention shifted to the massive crowds and their deeply emotional response to the loss. The channels competed to bring out testimonies of elderly people, the physically disabled, and the underprivileged who were beneficiaries of his public welfare initiatives - lined up at many places in south Kerala for a last glimpse. The live telecast also presented visual images and videos of school children waiting on the roadsides to meet their hero or *beloved Chandy Appappan*, granddad, as indicated in a poster raised by one of the children, echoing affective fan public around these spectacles. The channels reiterated that these testimonies are symbolic of his extensive popularity, which resonated with people of all ages. While documenting the emotionally charged scenes along the procession, at Thirunakkara ground in Kottayam, where the bereaved public paid their homage, and at his residence in Puthuppalli, Kottayam, many reporters were visibly moved. Some shed tears in front of the screen, finding it challenging to maintain their composure. The live telecast of the tearful and grieving

onlookers and the public who ran behind the funeral cortege with the coffin to catch a glimpse of his mortal remains, accompanied by evocative background music, mounted quite a spectacle on the streets as well as on screens

As the procession following his hearse from Thiruvananthapuram to Kottayam, where he was laid to rest, which spanned 150 kilometres, took twenty-eight hours to complete, most news channels suspended their regular programming to televise it and the final tributes paid by thousands of people, including elderly women and children, who waited along the roadside as the vehicle carrying Chandy's remains inched forward (See Figure 4&5).



**Figure 4:** A Visual of the funeral procession of Chandy in a specially modified Kerala state transport bus, adorned with his pictures, garlands, struggling to move through the thousands of people thronged at Kottayam.



**Figure 5:** From 24 News' live coverage of the sea of people witnessing Chandy's funeral procession when it reached Puthuppalli, his hometown in the night.

Taking cues from these insights on the monumental public attendance and their live broadcast, I explore how the cultural dynamics of live-streaming celebrity funerals unravel the engagements of the state's public sphere with public affects. The monumentality of this mourning public contradicts the crosscutting discourse of Kerala's progressive public sphere, built on the plank of a "reasonable" public, deviating significantly from the character of the South Indian public sphere at large.<sup>30</sup> Even if one disregards the discursive intensity of such a projection, it is important to ask why the monumental mourning public is triggered by death so much more than by the landmark life events of celebrities. To grapple with these colossal mourning publics, it is essential to examine their interplay with the cultural politics of mass participation in the VIP funerals of South India and their lineage in the culture of star worship within the context of cine-politics.<sup>31</sup> The cine-political formations in the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, characterised by the conversion of star power into political power, primarily manifest through fan devotion to legendary matinee idols (Prasad 2014). Such formations not only transform celebrity deaths and subsequent mourning into events of monumental public attendance and frenzied public behaviour but also display the power to convert citizens into fans (or devotees), through all the landmark events of cine-political significance. The public outpouring of emotions at celebrity funerals is then shaped by the mourners' imaginary identifications with the star charisma of the deceased and their political aspirations for a virtual political order, which is reinforced by the quasi-religious meanings accorded to stars' cinematic roles. This process, in turn, is retained in and reifies the public legitimacy of star

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<sup>30</sup> South India, also referred to as Peninsular India, comprises the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana.

<sup>31</sup> I use the terms VIP funerals and celebrity funerals interchangeably in this chapter.

personas and reflects the visceral intensity of public emotions upon stars' deaths.

What sets apart the corporeality of the mourning public in the funerals of public figures in Kerala is that neither their personal lives nor their civic engagements commanded massive media attention during their lifetimes, except for Kalabhavan Mani's cinematic roles. The massive display media attention at these figures' funerals signify a marked disjuncture from the relatively subdued public lives of the icons. A newly emergent media ecology has fostered the growth of the attention economy over the urgent expressions of liveness facilitated by internet-driven media. The rapid multiplication of devices with screen network connectivity in the last four decades is crucial to this new media habitus. This thriving televisual economy has also been amplified by YouTube, which became a significant cultural infrastructure in India and a decisive digital intermediary for legacy television by 2010 (Lotz 2021). Challenging conception that the internet has "disrupted" media industries, Lotz delineates how digital technologies offered existing media new tools for reaching people. The parallel live streaming of these funerals on YouTube channels, owned by respective TV channels, hence augmented the creative possibilities of legacy television in consolidating the economy of grief and expanding their audience demography.

The mourning public gathers not only in person to join the funeral processions but also in front of TV sets and, more recently, via live streaming to participate in the moment of spectacular grieving. The phenomenon of mass grieving stands at a curious historical-theoretical cross-section. On the one hand, there is a monumental crowd in physical attendance, paying last tributes. This crowd, ephemeral in its lifespan, forms the fulcrum of the media extravaganza. On the other hand, the moving and still images of this monumental live attendance, available via electronic media, precipitate the wider arena of the mourning public that joins the crowd via their private screens. As they watch the mourning event live, they mark their "attendance" at the funeral procession in (physical) absentia. As I further illustrate attributes of funereal mediatization and the mourning public, the core

contradiction of a monumental live attendance facilitated by the spread of media gets unraveled. In making sense of this public that really “need not be there,” I grapple also with communication systems designed to harvest attention at the cost of corporeal attendance; in this brief moment of monumental live attendance, though, the live attendees set aside the explicitly mediated experience of the funeral procession.

The intensely affective and networked publics formed around these visual spectacles in Kerala disrupt the state’s claim to a rational mediation of public affect, the very underpinning of its further claim to a progressive public sphere. While Kerala appears relatively immune to star power and maintains a more rational stance vis-à-vis monumental expressions of public emotion during VIP funerals, it remains deeply embedded in star politics, albeit through the distribution of star value beyond the institutions of cinema. The melodramatic outpouring of emotion in mass grieving destabilises Kerala’s claim to “rational” exceptionalism, particularly in terms of its progressive citizenry.

### **Kerala versus South India: A (Melodramatic) Rain Shadow Region?**

The personas of certain legendary South Indian icons who managed to convert their star power into political significance engendered vital imbrications in popular culture, celebrity politics, and broader socio-political mobilisations. Unsurprisingly, their deaths—M. G. Ramachandran (hereafter MGR, 1987), Jayalalitha (2016), M. Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu (2018), N. T. Rama Rao (hereafter NTR, 1996) in Andhra Pradesh, and RajKumar in Karnataka (2006)—triggered frenzied collectives of mourners. Following MGR’s demise, many Tamil people even resorted to acts of self-harm, such as self-immolation, wrist-cutting, and ingestion of poison, which resulted in thirty-one deaths in two days (Venkataramani 1998). Many young men tonsured their heads, a customary Hindu practice typically observed following the death of a family member.<sup>32</sup> The more shocking incidents established associations between public grief over the deaths of political icons, particularly matinee idols in

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<sup>32</sup> The grieving masses also resorted to acts of vandalism: hurling stones, incinerating buses, dislodging road dividers, plundering shops, conflagrating statues of opposition leaders, and so on. Whereas, in the aftermath of NTR’s death, a follower committed suicide and many temples sprouted in rural Andhra Pradesh, where he was worshipped as a Hindu deity.

these South Indian states, and suicide and violence.<sup>33</sup> The hysterical mourning of the public was identified as a feature of fan *bhakti* [devotion] (Prasad 2014). In informal public discourse, the adulation of these celebrity politicians made them individuals with quasi-divine personas. Prasad argues that fan *bhakti* as a cultural practice derives from the historical phenomenon of cine-politics, manifesting in virtual political sovereignty, whereby the marginalised population achieves a surrogate political existence in the shadows of the new nation. As Prasad shows, this history took shape in the wake of regionalist assertions of linguistic nationalism by South Indian states. The public enthusiasm surrounding star bodies thus signifies a sense of political community forged between a star and his fans. It becomes a locus of imaginary identification for individual fans amid conflicts over national identity at a specific moment in Indian history. This is the political enthusiasm that later extends to dead bodies in public view.

The adulation of celebrities and enthusiasm for their funerals in Kerala nevertheless shies away from “irrational” bursts of public emotion. The disproportionately large farewells given to public figures such as literary and cultural practitioners, spiritual leaders, and small-time film actors need to be understood as part of the cleavages between the political and cultural spheres in Kerala<sup>34</sup>, as opposed to the relatively smooth translation of star power into the political domain in South India (Radhakrishnan 2010). The cleavages are built upon the state’s relatively subdued and stoic star-fan relationship. The influence of social and political movements—particularly the stronghold of communism in public life—as well as the role of religious communities in contestation with the distribution of development metrics across Kerala’s linguistic community, has made it less cohesive around a small number of cultural-political icons but more accepting of a wide array of social leadership. What makes the Kerala case particularly curious is how this cultural media economy of grief permeates into the rational, progressive premises

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<sup>33</sup> The funeral procession of Rajkumar in Karnataka, attended by nearly two million people, was also marked by violence, as mourners attacked public property, leading to police intervention involving lathi-charge and tear gas.

<sup>34</sup> Prem Nazir, Malayalam cinema’s one of the biggest superstars, failed to win the State Assembly election. More recently, renowned actor Suresh Gopi, who contested for a parliamentary seat from Thrissur and D Krishnakumar, who contested for Kerala Legislative Assembly from Thiruvananthapuram under the banner of the BJP, failed. The film stars/actors who successfully fought elections from Kerala, like Mukesh and Innocent, were backed by major political parties, and the star value is viewed only as an incremental advantage.

upon which the popular discourses of the state's public sphere are mounted. The corporeal intensity of the mourning public disrupts the historical tension between realism and melodrama, which is vital to the fashioning of the state's rational, progressive self-disposition. This Malayali self-image is built upon the spatial reconfiguration of the inside and outside as distinct realms of melodrama and realism, which posits melodrama as an irrational remnant of realism and its cultural authenticity. This split mandate undergirds the privileging of secular rationality around which the public sphere has been imagined and manifests in the repression of public mourning from Kerala's visual culture.

The claims of the Malayali public as an enlightened reading public, a byproduct of rational modernity's formation of the state's public sphere, significantly shape the cultural authenticity of realism in the state (Radhakrishnan 2016; Varughese 2017). The progressive credentials attributed to this reading public have nonetheless engendered cultural disdain towards Kerala's neighbouring states, manifested predominantly in perceiving its public within the affective economy of melodrama and the populist idioms of mass cinema. Condescension toward the "irrationality" of the mass audience of neighbouring states, particularly Tamil people, has emerged from the hyper-visible fandom around South Indian male stars (Srinivas 2021), and popular cinema being adopted as a medium for linguistic mobilization (Pandian 1992). Such irrationality is, in turn, positioned against the predominance of social realism in Malayalam cinema that endorses a "developmental aesthetics" (Prasad 2014:189) and a claim to the rational credentials of the state's cultural industries and its audience.

The interventions of culturally progressive movements, such as the library movement and literacy movement,<sup>35</sup> along with rational, progressive movements, such as the *Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad* (People's Science Movement) and the rationalist group *Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham*, which sought to transform popular

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<sup>35</sup> The library movement in Kerala is a grassroots initiative that emerged in the early twentieth century, focused on establishing public libraries to promote literacy, education, and access to knowledge for all, significantly contributing to the state's cultural and intellectual development. The literacy movement is a significant social initiative that began in the 1980s, aimed at eradicating illiteracy and promoting education across all demographics, resulting in the state achieving one of the highest literacy rates in India.

spheres into rational political space, consolidated the discourses of secular rationality by building a progressive and scientific temperament around the public sphere. These movements, strongly supported by the Communist Party, served as the primary vehicle for Malayali engagements with scientific discourses from the 1960s to the 1980s, promoting a secular understanding of science through mass education and numerous campaigns for civil action and community development (Bijukumar 2019). These initiatives are an extension of the broader communist project aimed at constructing a public sphere through engagement with popular domains such as cinema, folk songs, and theatre, which enabled it to bridge the gap between the nationalist elites represented by the Indian National Congress and the common masses (Mannathukaran 2013). While it allowed the Left to consolidate and mobilize a public sphere, expanding its base among marginalized and working-class populations, their appropriation of key public spaces—such as libraries, reading rooms, tea shops, and village squares—were projected as emblematic of the rational, progressive credentials of these spheres, emphasizing the importance of reading in the regional public culture. Radhakrishnan (2016) argues that the narratives of Kerala's exceptionalism are claimed through the credentials of an enlightened reading public, a distinctive history of communist mobilizations, and a model of social development that obscures its reliance on remittances from the Persian Gulf.

Even as they contributed to the formation of the state's public sphere, these interventions have been instrumental in fashioning the narratives of its genealogy through literary and cultural modernity and its translations into the Malayali rational self-definition. It is within the valences of a rationally modern public sphere in the cultural politics of the state that the inquiry into what drives an affective economy on the monumental scale of public emotion during these funerals emerges. Key to this conflict is the way Kerala, while being facilitated by the state and other democratic edifices, situates itself within the broader context of star worshipping and its populist dynamics in South India. For instance, unlike the frenzied collective of mourners discussed earlier, the funerals in Kerala drew a relatively disciplined and self-restrained public in grief. Attending these events in person held great importance in recognising and installing people's respective leaders in public memory as mass

heroes. The heroes' cultural sovereignty is translated into political sovereignty, however ephemeral. While Kerala may be different in handling the tensions, it firmly inhabits South India in terms of the conflicts and anxieties that divide cultural and political domains. Celebrity funerals are occasions when we witness a public reclaiming of the political by the quasi-monarchic splendour accorded to cultural icons of smaller constituencies.

The state retreats and allows this public reclaiming of the political by way of the dead body of the cultural sovereign, partly because it poses no threat, but also to acknowledge the abrupt and incomplete transition from monarchic rule to constitutional democracy that characterises much of South Asian politics. While the abruptness of this unstable transition is owed to the period of colonial rule, the post-independence cultural realm of South India has had to bear the burden of “serving as a shadow structure of political representation” (Prasad 2014:19). The monarchic monumentality of celebrity funerals—even if ephemeral, since it is triggered only by mass public attention to events surrounding death—is, therefore, ironically facilitated by the state functionaries and procedures that represent the democratic artifice. It is important to note, however, that the growing public interest in these televisual spectacles has not replaced the newspapers' coverage of VIP funerals in the state. Yet both television and newspapers have prospered and proliferated due to the endorsement and public validation offered in reciprocation. Hence, the genealogy of the state's visual media, particularly its transition from traditional to new media through the convergence of legacy television with internet-driven platforms, is key to understanding the emergence of media practices that facilitate the spectacles of mass grieving. This shift has been pivotal in the proliferation of news television in the state. To explore this further, let me examine how satellite television laid the foundation for this phenomenon, particularly through the proliferation of live-streaming.

### **Satellite Television and the Proliferation of News Channels**

The surge of private satellite television channels during the early 2000s broke the long-standing dominance of DD Malayalam (the regional arm of the national public broadcaster, Doordarshan) as well as Asianet and Surya TV, which had been the only

private channels in Malayalam until 2000. Apart from the newly acquired functional freedom of the private sector following economic liberalisation, which resulted in a deregulated broadcasting market (Mehta 2008), the widespread popularity of private cable TV networks by the late '90s also precipitated the expansion of satellite channels. The first Malayalam satellite channel, Asianet—also one of the first private satellite television channels in India—was introduced in 1993 as a current affairs and entertainment channel using a Russian satellite. It appealed to the Malayali audience through entertainment shows, news, and serials. It was well received in the wake of mounting anti-establishment political energies and the “neoliberal global market’s promises of the avenues to gratify one’s desires that were hitherto forbidden within the moral economy of the welfare state” (Joseph 2017:4). Asianet’s popularity grew quickly and was followed by the 1998 launch of Surya TV, owned by the Sun Network, one of the largest media conglomerates in the country. The subsequent rise of multiple satellite television channels like Kairali TV, Jeevan, Amrita, Kiran TV, Jai Hind, Kairali We, Mazhavil Manorama, and Flowers led to a significant change in the state’s mediascape in the 2000s. Most of these channels, including Asianet, Surya, and Kairali, have also launched more channels exclusively for movies, musicals, and phone-in programs.

The idea of liveness, mobilised on the claim of providing direct access to the distant “now”—the mainstay of live television broadcasting—has been crucial in expanding the audience demography of these channels. They built substantial popular interest in the live telecasting of various major events, including VIP funerals, election results, and so on, by providing immediate access to the distant. These channels broadcast live the football World Cup, cricket tournaments of the Indian national team, highlights of state annual budget sessions, beauty pageants, award shows, and some of the festivals and game shows that are popular in the region, and have gained these channels substantial domestic and diaspora audiences.<sup>36</sup> The last two decades also witnessed the emergence of niche Malayalam channels. For instance, most of the prominent political parties in Kerala launched

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<sup>36</sup> It includes the live coverage of Ranji Trophy tournaments, a domestic first-class cricket championship played between multiple teams representing regional and state cricket associations, and *Thrissur Pooram*, the largest annual temple festival held in Thrissur, Kerala.

their TV channels—either party-run or owned by individuals or firms affiliated with political parties. These channels, including Kairali TV, Jai Hind TV, India Vision, and Janam TV, helped their parent body to consolidate their base and reach a wide audience by spreading their ideologies or fashioning the public image of many regional political leaders.<sup>37</sup> For example, Kairali TV, credited with initiating the cultural practice of live telecasts of VIP funerals in Kerala, was established in 2000 under the ownership of Malayalam Communications Limited, an organization closely associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the state. The channel's key leadership roles have consistently been occupied by individuals with direct party affiliations, with Malayalam film superstar Mammooty serving as its chairman. Widely recognized as a party-affiliated channel, Kairali TV has functioned as a media platform for the narratives of the Left Democratic Front in Kerala, actively defending Left government policies and promoting Left political ideology. This was followed by the rise of Jai Hind TV, a news channel widely affiliated with the Indian National Congress, while Manorama News—emerging as an extension of the Malayala Manorama newspaper—has long functioned as a mouthpiece for the party.

These media platforms have not merely amplified the political viewpoints of their respective parties by operating as counter-media spaces within Kerala's highly polarized television news landscape; they have also consistently invested in cultivating favorable coverage of party leadership and constructing a populist public image for their political icons. The sustained emphasis of these outlets on building an affective economy around party figures must therefore be understood in relation to the mediation of political culture through media-political partnerships, particularly by drawing on the populist valences embedded in media spectacles of mass grief. The media establishments run or owned by political parties have not only thrived but also dominated the media ecosystem of Kerala, which was shaped as much by neoliberal economic policy as by Delhi media. Regional politics has,

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<sup>37</sup> In addition, many channels were introduced to target specific communities, including Amrita TV by the Mata Amritanandamayi Math; Shalom TV, an Indian catholic Christian TV channel; Darshana TV, the first satellite channel from the Malabar region owned by Muslim community management; and Harvest TV, a Christian devotional channel. These channels are borne out of the newly acquired economic and cultural mobility of their respective communities.

therefore, superseded what was effectively a political move toward the “free” flow of information.

This assertive cultural multipolarity has expanded the media industries manifold. It has also resulted in various community and religious groups owning media outlets as their official media outlets. This includes Shalom TV, a Malayalam Catholic channel; Darshana TV, owned by the Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama (EK faction of the Sunni Muslim community); Amrita TV, owned by the Mata Amritanandamayi Math, Media One TV, owned by Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, illustrating how a range of new actors have come to own media establishments that now exercise a significant voice in the media generated public sphere. The growing presence of these faith-based organisations in media ownership has also been invested in to expand the global reach of the ideologies of their channel and the philanthropic initiatives of its through broadcasts to the Indian Subcontinent, Middle East, Europe and countries like Australia, United States, Canada and Europe with a significant Malayali diaspora as its audience demography. Many of these channels has been expanded also to digital spaces, such as the “Amrita Live”, available as an app on Google Play, Apple App Store and Amazon, offering the spiritual content from Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Amma), along with Multilingual shows, movies and news for a global audience.

The key breakthrough for the purpose of this chapter was the introduction of around-the-clock news channels such as India Vision, Asianet News, Reporter TV, Manorama News, Kairali People, Mathrubhumi News, Media One, and 24 News TV. They significantly augmented the Malayali television audience’s exposure to news, particularly primetime news. Since most of these news channels are extensions of popular newspapers in Malayalam, the televisual economy operates as an overlay upon the newspaper-reading public (See Figures 6&7). This newspaper-reading public has been at the heart of Kerala's literary and political public sphere.



**Figure 6:** From Madhyamam newspaper, published the next day after E.K. Nayanar's death on 20th May 2004.



**Figure 7:** The editorial page of the Madhyamam newspaper dated June 1, 2009, published a day after the death of renowned poet Kamala Das.

In the competitive media ecosystem of official media partners and broadcasters, news channels recognise the potential of the live coverage of VIP funeral processions. Around 2015, with the launch of Reliance Jio with predatory pricing (Athique and Kumar 2022), the eruption of a strong digital video ecosystem resulted in most news channels starting an official YouTube channel. Proliferating mobile screens began to overwhelm television viewing behaviour. Nevertheless, it is

important to understand that digital disruption has not replaced television; it provides another interface for legacy media, particularly to channel public attention towards VIP funerals animated by urgent expressions of “liveness.” Despite Derrida’s (1996) critique of “televisual artificiality,” which highlights the live broadcast as an inherently constructed event that mediates, interprets, and often distorts reality, the live coverage of grand funerals holds the potential to evoke powerful spectacles of public emotion, marking the collective cultural memories of the state.

### **The Affective Public(s)**

In *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*, Beller (2006) explains how capitalism transformed the act of looking into value-productive labour with the emergence of cinema and its succeeding formations, particularly television, computers, and the Internet. He argues that capitalism began monetising attention, which resulted in many media platforms operating within the computational logic of capital. Indeed, the most well-known case in which the media spectacles around an individual's personal and public life found its logical extension in their death was the live coverage of the death and funeral of Princess Diana (1997), one of the most-watched live broadcasts to date (Rigney 2017).<sup>38</sup> The extensive live coverage of her funeral that turned into a global event of seemingly epic proportions is founded upon the scandalous value of her life as an object of global fascination and obsessional documentation, both in the tabloid industry and across the spectrum of mass media. The heavily dramatised televisual spectacle of mass hysteria around Diana’s death was the cloyingly sentimental effect of media manipulation and populist reaction, anchored by the royal figure rich in cultural themes and fantasies (Kear and Steinberg 1999; Hey 1999). Analysing the

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<sup>38</sup> In India, one of the VIP deaths that triggered comparable unrest and public outcry was the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh guards in 1984. It was followed by a series of organised pogroms against the Sikh community across the country. Doordarshan (DD), the public broadcaster and the only television channel in India back then, was the last to inform the people of the news of Indira’s death. More than ten hours after she was shot, the news was announced on DD’s evening news long after All India Radio and BBC. However, Doordarshan remained stationed at Teen Murti Bhavan and televised her body lying in state, and the distraught mourners alternately. The coverage included short programs about Mrs. Gandhi’s life, the tributes of various leaders, and devotional songs played at intervals. Although Doordarshan extensively covered the funeral with state honours in Rajghat, accompanied by various foreign dignitaries, political leaders, and thousands of party workers, it did not show the violent attacks on the Sikhs and their properties in Delhi and other parts of the country (Bajpai 2009).

role of photographs in constructing the image simulacrum of Princess Diana, Chancey (1999) posits that the global reaction to her death is propelled by photographs fostering a perceived intimacy with the public, thereby contributing to the worldwide outpouring of grief upon her death. Diana lived under great media scrutiny fueled by an insatiable hunger for sensationalism. It quite literally chased her to a violent death. The funerals under discussion here, by contrast—those of Kalabhavan Mani, the Dalit Malayalam actor, in 2016; of Panakkad Hyder Ali Shihab Thangal, in 2022; and of the former chief minister of Kerala, Oommen Chandy, in 2023, which are detailed earlier in the chapter, were preceded by relatively sedate public lives. The massive emotional outpouring registered at these figures' funerals did not merely follow from a life lived in the fast lane of media attention.

How do these spectacles manifest affective publics? How can their emotional valences be engaged in relation to the affective qualities of the public sphere, and counterposed to rational modernity's claims of public reason? The dominant imaginaries regarding Kerala's public sphere are predicated upon a rational modernity paradigm, materialised in the discursive terrain of rational debates in the public domain (Bijukumar 2019; Harikrishnan 2022; Joseph 2017).<sup>39</sup> This paradigm has excluded and delegitimised a wide range of emotional expressions and "irrational" outpourings, prompting the rise of multiplicities of public spheres, particularly of counter-publics (Warner 2002) that disrupt this rational cleansing. As Warner suggests, these counter-publics have emerged as distinct subgroups that challenge or diverge from dominant publics, giving voice to marginalised groups often excluded from mainstream discourses. Communication technologies play a crucial role in facilitating interactions between these publics and counter-publics. Televisual networks have maneuvered the potential of live broadcasting to mediate and amplify spectators' affective sensibilities and visceral responses to loss. Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) delineate how live broadcasts of certain events constitute a

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<sup>39</sup> These imaginaries include an active reading public nurturing the public sphere (Bijukumar), everyday social spaces such as tea shops, public libraries, village squares, and so on forming as discursive arenas of public deliberations (Harikrishnan) and an enduring legacy of secular rationality vindicated by the left political tradition (Joseph, "Contemplative Spectator"). For more on the formatting of the public sphere, see also Calhoun and Habermas.

new television genre of ceremonial spectacles, turning them into world rituals, they find the live coverage of ceremonial events as a liminal moment in which society is ‘irrigated by the overflowing of *communitas*’ by a transient but powerful sense of solidarity and belonging (104). Analysing live broadcasting as the semantic specificity of television, Bourdon (2000) argues that live broadcasting, which is valorised as a means to transcend temporal and spatial constraints, facilitates the convergence of vast groups of people in a distinct collective experience. Mapping out the implications of “liveness” both as material and as affect in the convergence of news narratives in Indian television, Kumar (2015) writes:

liveness is audio-visually composed as much of live handheld footage as it is of dramatic soundtracks, of animated movement across images or screens, of animated texts and scrolls, of still images dramatically zoomed into, and of old live footage referring to new subjects. When news subjects walk away from a sea of journalists and cameras, the new media screens split between them and the newsroom, combining live action and sensational text with the highpitched enunciation of urgency. Liveness within news media collapses the wall that separates us—the audience—from the substance rendered in live coverage, seemingly dismantling the media’s critical role in connecting news content and the audience. The problems of liveness then are twofold: (1) the analytical gap between content and audiences collapses, and (2) the news media works out a convenient exceptionalism by which spaces away from the newsroom are further removed (539).

Similarly, the live coverage of celebrity funerals blurs the distinction between content and audience since it unfolds in real time, directly from actual locations. This distance from newsrooms and media studios generates an illusion for the audience of active participation in the unfolding events. Moreover, the news anchor’s presence is limited to a voiceover, guiding the spectators through the series of events displayed on the live television screen. Live telecasting intervenes in the usual formulas or genres of broadcasting that are either suspended or preempted, followed by special announcements

or preludes. The live coverage of funerals thus commences with a breaking news bulletin that announces the death to the viewers and thereby removes them from the routines of the daily news by locking them into liveness for hours or days. Contrary to the television programs intended for an undifferentiated audience assumed to be passive and with a short attention span, the live streaming of celebrity funerals runs for hours and is envisioned primarily for a specific audience. This visual and live evocation triggers a sense of ceremonial participation among the viewers.

For instance, in the animated voice-over that accompanies the images of Chandy's funeral, he is constantly addressed as *Kunjoonj* or *Puthuppalli's Kunjoonj*, a constituency he represented for more than five decades. The telecast is filled with emotionally charged testimonies from people who reiterate his phenomenal presence among them. The channels present the crowd thronging the roadsides, people running behind the funeral cortege, and the public waiting patiently for hours to meet the leader one last time, much like they did during his *Janasambarka paripadi*, a mass contact program<sup>40</sup> lauded as a unique democratic experiment under which the chief minister would go to the public to hear their grievances and ensure relief, short-circuiting the bureaucratic procedures. By comparison, channels extol Mani's working-class origins while celebrating how he remained an integral part of public life in Chalakkudi, his native place. The channels continuously state that the mass grief around his death resulted from the warmth he exuded as a performer and a human being, which endeared him to thousands. Similarly, Media One's narrative highlights Thangal's ability to maintain cordial personal relations despite political differences. One of the key recurring motifs in the live coverage remains that of historicity—in the sense that the events on the screen are unique and that participants and commentators are privileged to be a part of this history. The telecast also features live coverage of eulogies and speeches delivered at the funeral, allowing the audience to witness heartfelt tributes from close associates,

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<sup>40</sup> Mass contact program was a remarkable innovation, under which he stood on his feet for fourteen to eighteen hours a day in each of the state's fourteen districts, meeting lakhs of voters in order to address the grievances of the people directly.

loved ones, and the public. Numerous camera angles capture poignant moments of grief, including close-ups of reactions from attendees. High-pitched background scores, insertion of images, and live videos from multiple locations within the same arena uphold this intensity.

These spectacles thus contribute to the "affective economies" of grief (Ahmed 2004) by recruiting televisual and social networks to shape the process of mourning, even as these networks retain an economic force that significantly affects social relationships. Echoing Ahmed's views on the role of emotion in forming subject formations within social collectives, a robust economy of grief has consolidated around public mourning, revealing how public affect intersects with social and political structures while being shaped by broader economic and cultural forces. Live media events spread across various platforms, leading to the revival of live television that reimagines and reinvents liveness itself; however, it confers a distinct competitive advantage upon TV networks over streamed content services (Sørensen 2015).<sup>41</sup> Boyd (2010) understands networked publics as both the space constructed through networked technologies and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of <sup>42</sup>people, technology, and practice. The swift dissemination of short video clips from live-streamed funerals, which may span several days, leverages the immediacy and extensive reach of these platforms to cater to users seeking brief updates. This contrasts with television and YouTube, which serve audiences accustomed to more prolonged and detailed content. Additionally, the broad reach of social media facilitates the content's accessibility across various languages, though this expansive reach frequently emphasises the spectacle and visual grandeur of the event over deeper engagement with the content.

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<sup>41</sup> Sørensen examines how the live TV coverage of major events is key to the multiplatform strategy of British public service channels.

<sup>42</sup> However, newly emergent short video platforms like MX TakaTak and Twitch, which spread content quickly due to their brief format, have little impact here. This is partly because the subjects of televisual and digital streaming are not heavily affected by time constraints; rather, the prolonged and slow-moving temporality of funerals is a fundamental aspect of the visuality of the final journeys of public figures.

The massive popularity of digital and social media- and by extension the vast profits to be made by harnessing this popularity- also led to the rise of algorithmic biases of personalized content filtering, including filter bubbles (Pariser 2011) and echo chambers (Quattrociocchi et al.2016), which tend to isolate users from a range of viewpoints. Nevertheless, the mourning public mobilises and connects through displays of heightened expressions of emotions and sentiments. By situating monumental spectacles of public affect within the broader context of the public enthusiasm for the star politics in South India, I show how these displays constitute a cultural counterpoint to the state's otherwise rational self-positioning.

### **The Enchantments of Public Grieving**

The public spheres of South India have contested the preeminent, post-independence centre of political life in India by negotiating supra-national structures through cultural and political idioms of linguistic sub-nationalism. These negotiations, which intensified in the mid-1950s via acts of self-immolation and widespread public unrest for the linguistic reorganisation of states, led to the recentering of popular consciousness on new linguistic-national identities marked by cultural distinctions.<sup>43</sup>The subsequent emergence of multiple and fragmented sovereignties has further amplified social clusters' public confrontations with the Indian social body (Hansen 2006). The phenomenal star power of celebrities across South India also emerges from this context of political formations cursed with a congenital identity crisis (Prasad 2014). These virtual sovereignty formations around star figures, therefore, supplement the lack of political representation, utilising linguistic nationality as the basis for popular sovereignty.

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<sup>43</sup> During the anti-Hindi agitation of the mid-1960s, the act of self-immolation emerged as a powerful form of political expression across various South Indian states. On January 25, 1965—one year before the Official Languages Act came into effect—a 27-year-old Tamil man, Keelapaloor Chinnasamy, set himself ablaze at the Trichy railway station, shouting pro-Tamil slogans: “Tamil Vazhga! Hindi Ozhiga!” (“Long live Tamil! Down with Hindi!”). His act triggered a wave of self-immolations by five other Tamil youths in the days that followed, who echoed the powerful slogan: *Udal Mannukku, Uyir Tamizhukku*—“[Our] body for the soil, [our] life for Tamil” . In the years since, Tamil Nadu has observed January 25 as “Tamil Martyrs' Day” to commemorate Chinnasamy's sacrifice. While these political suicides dramatically and assertively drew national attention to their cause, the act of self-immolation soon evolved into a symbolic form of mass protest. Although the anti-Mandal protests during the 1990s, opposing the 27% reservation for Other Backwards Communities in government jobs, also witnessed the self-immolation as a form of protest by a student of Delhi University, the act was not replicated by anyone else in North India.

Kerala has remained largely detached from this trajectory of cine, political, and cultural formations and fan bhakti as a source of popular enthusiasm. The development of cinema and the star system in the region has not fostered fan devotion as a pivotal resource for forging community. The lack of star power's translation into political power has led to a relatively stoic relationship between film stars and fans in Kerala and is claimed as a manifestation of the rational, progressive sensibility of the Malayalis. On the contrary, I contend that a primarily televisual economy, which capitalises on the emotional valences of a monumental mourning public, incorporates Kerala within South India's star politics. Concurrently, I situate the tableau of monarchic splendour manifested in the public's emotional outpouring at the funerals of prominent figures in Kerala as indicative of the broader cultural intensities of South India. It also elevates public figures with relatively sedate lives to the status of stars endowed with charismatic authority through the iconisation of their death. During the fleeting moments of their beloved leaders' final journeys, the monumental public and their emotional outpourings embody the cultural manifestation of popular sovereignty, which is, remarkably, choreographed in part by democratic functionaries of the state. To illustrate this, the live broadcast of these funerals showcases how the public is granted access to the ceremony in which they stand witness, mourn, pay homage, and actively contribute to the grandeur of the funeral. Also, the state accommodates mourners with a specially modified bus with wide windows for public tributes along the streets. For example, during the funeral of Oommen Chandy, the government of Kerala provided the Kerala State transport bus as his funeral cortege which was followed by Kerala state police to manage the monumental crowd on the road.

The primary focus of the live media broadcast is thus on the bus navigating through the grieving crowds, along with the closeup shots depicting the scenes inside the bus and the state honours given by the Kerala police (See Figure 8). The deceased leader's body, placed in a glass coffin elevated for public visibility from the roadside, was accompanied by his wife, children, and numerous party leaders. His son, Chandy Oommen, became a central figure in both public attention and media coverage,

standing throughout the journey to thank the people gathered across South Kerala to bid farewell to his father. Inside the bus, the scene was orchestrated as a moving spectacle of the funeral procession, with the camera shifting focus to capture the grief of each individual, highlighting the personal and collective mourning within the procession. Scenes from within the bus are displayed side by side using a split-screen, alongside footage capturing the crowd's emotional outpouring along the procession route.



**Figure 8:** Massive crowds lining the streets in Kerala to bid farewell to V.S. Achuthanandan, the veteran Communist leader and former chief minister of Kerala, partaking in his 150-kilometre-long funeral procession with his mortal remains in a state transport bus.

The state and its parties also make elaborate arrangements to invite the general public to offer their final farewells at the official residence of party leaders, party offices, community halls, public stadiums, and huge pavilions, all known for their capacity to accommodate large gatherings. To manage the huge gathering at Thirunakkara maidanam, where his body was kept for public viewing, the district police deployed approximately 2,000 personnel at the venue. The TV channels focus on emotionally volatile audience members in these civic arenas, which become a key site for focusing and galvanising public attention and sentiment. While the rational

self-fashioning of the public sphere in Kerala may be repressive for mourning practices in general, the overwhelming eruption of emotion among the monumental attendees is nevertheless *rationalised* by a “civic sense.” Not letting the emotions get the better of them, the relatively “orderly” attendees remain aware of and sensitive towards a sense of civic duty to reciprocate the gestures made by the state. Therefore, the visceral outpouring of emotion against the rational stranglehold over the public sphere does not translate into general protestations against the state and its symbolic, order-maintaining power. The civic responsibilities of both state and mourners are wedded in events that enjoin the media and the citizens at large to stand witness, if not participate directly.

Nonetheless, these spectacles reveal a form of popular sovereignty that publicly deviates from, if not challenges, the electoral basis of sovereign power. I use the term *popular sovereignty* here as a theoretical extension of its conventional meaning, which frames the will of the people as the foundational principle of political power. In this context, sovereignty refers to the supreme authority of the people in the iconisation of certain deaths as expressed through the massive emotional responses to the death of certain public figures, particularly when these figures are elevated to the status of cultural icons. This process becomes especially apparent when relatively small-scale public figures are transformed into grand symbols of popular sovereignty, while acknowledging the orchestrated efforts of political parties, media establishments, and state institutions. Importantly, this understanding of sovereignty departs from its electoral basis: the consent of the people to these departed figures is not expressed through votes or electoral basis but through the visible enthusiasm and participation surrounding their public life, which is manifested in sites of mass grieving, thereby complementing traditional forms of popular consent.

I have used the term popular sovereignty here as a theoretical extension to the conventional sense of the term as the will of the people being the foundational principle of political power. Sovereignty is used in the context of the massive

emotional responses to the death of certain public figures to refer to the supreme authority of the people, in the iconisation of the death of a public figure as a sovereign cultural icon, although for a brief period. It becomes particularly evident when small scale public figures are converted into grand icons of popular sovereignty, although choreographed political parties, media establishments and the institutions of state. they also deviates from the electoral basis of sovereignty as the consent of the people top the departed figures are marked by the popular enthusiasm around the public life of the departed which manifests in sites of mass grieving complementing the consent of the people. The organized efforts of the political parties to stage and appropriate funeral processions by embedding their ideology in communications with the grieving public emanates from the affective potential of these spectacles of mass grief. As a result, funerals of public figures provide an opportunity to consolidate cultural, political, or religious ground by plugging into the legacy of the departed figure. Therefore, the attention economy built around mass grieving lies at the crossroads of popular culture and political power, duly amplified by the affordances of live coverage. These spectacles of mass grieving disrupt the self-definition of the Malayali public sphere by hitting back at the historical repression of melodramatic outpourings in public.<sup>44</sup> The economy built around the affective valences of a monumental crowd not only amplifies and summons populist sentiments but also provides a visual archive of the emotional outpourings that militate against a public sphere historically alienated from the events of public grieving. The mediatization of the mourning public in Kerala restores, to some extent, the reciprocal order at the heart of democratic governance by allowing a breach of the disenchantment central to the emergence of rational modernity; indeed, this long-withheld breach further amplifies the enchantments of public grieving. In effect, public grieving and its mediatization in Kerala have become increasingly overdetermined by the historical-cultural embankments against overwhelming and possibly multiplicative emotional turbulence.

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<sup>44</sup> I have previously established how the rational discourses around the state's public sphere have been built by endorsing realism as the dominant mode of address over melodramatic articulations.

## **Conclusion**

I have elucidated the dynamics of a media ecosystem of mass grief in Kerala, exploring how it has consolidated an attention economy around the corporeal intensity of the attendees' visceral responses at the funeral sites of public figures. This media economy has emerged in the state over the last two decades and leverages urgent expressions of "liveness" to galvanise the crowd around TV sets and other personal screens. The resultant affective economy of grief has birthed a set of cultural practices that reside at the intersections of politics, religion, and popular culture. However, expressions of quasi-monarchic cultural sovereignty at these funerals are not mere effects of media-centric spectacle. The digital monumentality of the live-streamed crowd in mourning supplements the real-time congregation of the mourning public. While televisual networks certainly contribute to a procession's spectacular effects, the actual event and its material manifestations—that is, the mass culture of mourning crowds—hold more significance for understanding the dynamics of this cultural practice.

The temporality of the mourning public is in a peculiar self-identification here, because what calls it into existence is death, an absent presence whose quiet durability guides the life of every organism. The ephemeral monumentality of crowds thus punctuates the durable communication between life and death for the chosen few whose deeds managed to affect people deeply. The mourning public, therefore, stands witness to the materiality of death rituals while rendering "heavy" corporeality to the media event. In their workday lives, public figures might not assert the quasi-monarchic popular sovereignty bestowed upon their deaths, but this contrast is broadly indicative of the repression that characterises the rational self-fashioning of the Malayali public sphere.

The insistent presence of grand media spectacles—live coverage of events that suspend routine television programming for several days—uncovers the ruptures intrinsic to the public sphere. William Mazzarella (2015) investigates the "totalitarian pathology" of the North Korean crowd in an essay on Western media's disdainful responses to the widely circulated images of people crying at the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il in 2011. He argues that the disdain is derived from deep-rooted liberal anxiety in Western political discourses. The impossibility for

Western observers to believe the sincerity of the crowd's tears, he avers, manifests an itch in the liberal imagination informed by a purported logic of irrationality. The underlying tension between reason and affect, a fundamental conflict in mainstream political discourse, has also been a significant axis of the rational discourses around Kerala's public sphere. However, a rampant media economy built around the visceral apparatus of a monumental mourning public challenges, if not entirely disavows, the prevailing discourse around the rational, scientific temperament of Kerala's public sphere. The pervasiveness of mass, melodramatic mourning undermines Kerala's rational modernity as a cultural singularity by simultaneously situating this modernity within the cultural dynamics of mass politics

To further examine the spatial and aesthetic transgressions occasioned by the visceral intensities of the mourning publics and their fraught relationship with Kerala's public sphere, the next chapter explores how melodramatic community affiliations of an unruly crowd around the dead bodies turn mourning into loci of mass mobilisations in contemporary Malayalam cinema.

## Chapter 3

### **Mourning and *the occasions of excess*: melodramatic transgressions in contemporary Malayalam cinema**

This chapter examines the melodramatic transgressions in contemporary Malayalam cinema through two film texts: *Ee. Ma.Yau.* (Lijo Jose Pellissery 2017) and *Jana Gana Mana* (Dijo Jose Antony 2022). It explores how the “unruly” expressions of grief and rage by mourning publics emerge as key sites for negotiating justice, effectively foregrounding melodrama as a potent form of mourning. The melodramatic spectacles of collective mourning in these films serve as a discursive proxy for the bereaved’s confrontation with institutional power. The chapter analyses how they disrupt Malayalam cinema’s rejection of melodrama as an irrational remnant of realism and the spatial configuration of public and private in mourning through an extensive focus on the melodramatic community affiliation formed around dead bodies. It also explores how they contest the structural and symbolic violence inherent in a public sphere dominated by realist aesthetics, situating these films within a recent corpus of Malayalam cinema, marked by a new narrative milieu that engenders a significant shift in its narrative concerns and industrial dynamics. These changes, particularly the narrative preoccupation with community mobilisation in mourning, are thus engaged in relation to Malayalam cinema’s evolving engagements with various community groups and their sociopolitical and economic mobility. They are also examined in relation to the broader industrial and political shifts in Malayalam cinema, including the transition towards a dynamic streaming ecosystem, along with the ideological reconfigurations that address new political questions.

In 2018, the dead body of Najmal Babu, aka TN Joy, a former Naxal leader and social activist in Kerala<sup>45</sup>, was forcibly cremated according to Hindu rituals by

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<sup>45</sup> Najmal Babu, aka T.N. Joy, was a leftist intellectual, political activist, and one of the leading faces of the Naxalite movement in the 1970s in Kerala. In his letter to the authorities of Cheraman Masjid, he mentioned that his conversion to Islam was an act of solidarity with the Muslim fellows and in protest against the anti-Muslim programs, including the Gujarat genocide and the demolition of Babri Masjid by the Hindutva groups in India.

his family with the support of state police<sup>46</sup>, to save the secular credentials around his life. Najmal Babu converted to Islam in 2013 and informed the authorities of Cheraman Jama Masjid in Thrissur about his last wish to be buried in the mosque's graveyard. The incident not only evoked various discussions on the secularity of a dead body in a rational liberal public sphere but also formulated massive mourning responses against the violence meted out to the deceased even after death. Protesting the injustice, social activist Kamal C Chavara converted to Islam and changed his name to Kamal C Najmal. Also, funeral prayers and condolence gatherings were organised across many mosques in Kerala, including Cheraman Masjid, in the premises of the secretariat of Kerala, Jama Masjid in Delhi, and in many public spaces in solidarity with his religious and political choices.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, the mourning responses formed in this case were not a result of the mourners' personal intimacy with Najmal Babu as a writer or an ex-Naxalite leader. Instead, conflicting affective solidarities were formed around his dead body as he was denied agency over his identity and political choices.

The dead body, after all, offers a moment of reckoning to those who gather in the arena where claims can be made upon the private choices and traumas of the deceased individual. The contestations that emerge and the protestations that may be staged on his behalf are indeed an affirmation of the individual's inability to defend or assert himself. But they are also occasioned by a *temporary* handover of 'legitimate' authority to the social unit that holds the unquestionable public sanction to perform and participate in his last rites. It is in this moment of transition, at the site where the representative community is not always a stable and identifiable unit, that individual voice can be seized as an opportunity towards ritual or symbolic outrage. At this delicate point of political inflection, therefore, not only could an existing community make a claim in contestation, but new communities may also emerge in solidarity. This chapter interrogates the emergence of certain powerful films in which the dead body lends credence to the voices of underprivileged

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<sup>46</sup> The Kerala police had to use force to remove the activists who protested the decision of Babu's kin to cremate his body, against his wish to be interred at the Cheraman Mosque.

<sup>47</sup> Offering funeral prayer is considered an ethical responsibility of a Muslim towards a mayyith, the dead body of a Muslim.

communities, in the form of an emotional outburst, an ‘irrational’ outpouring of grief that *exceeds* the occasion. Malayalam cinema, since around 2015, has witnessed a remarkable upsurge of narrative tendencies spread across genres, where such community formation is occasioned by the rise of ethical solidarities around dead bodies. This recent corpus of Malayalam films on mourning death includes *Ithra Mathram* (2012)<sup>48</sup>, *Shavam* (2015)<sup>49</sup>, *Ee. Ma.Yau.* (2018), *Iblis* (2018), *Koode* (2018), *Queen* (2018), *Soofiyum Sujatayum* (2020), *Nayattu* (2021), and *Jana Gana Mana* (2022). These films illustrate an extensive preoccupation with collective mourning as manifested via the emergence of a transient but affective mourning community around death. On one hand, these community mobilisations bring a subversive turn in the spatial and aesthetic divide between the private and public spheres of mourning in contemporary Malayalam cinema. On the other hand, they make the bereaving subjects’ conflict with institutional structures like the state, police, media, and religion public. They occasion a public reckoning with grieving and mourning responses to death on behalf of a community entangled in conflicts over identitarian and representational concerns.

This chapter focuses on two films that showcase distinct modalities and reckonings at work within the political configurations triggered via public mourning: *Ee.Ma.Yau.* (Lijo Jose Pellissery 2018) and *Jana Gana Mana* (Dijo Jose Antony 2022). *Ee.Ma.Yau.* grapples with the material aspects of community formation around the dead body of a Dalit Christian fisherman vis-à-vis the corresponding power dynamics of Kerala.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, *Jana Gana Mana* appropriates mourning as an affective trope to negotiate questions of truth and justice using the generic features of a legal thriller, so as to target a pan-Indian audience. Nevertheless, to understand how community-centred mourning becomes a site of

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<sup>48</sup> K Gopinathan’s *Ithra Mathram* (2012), the cinematic adaptation of Kalpatta Narayanan’s eponymous novel, is a feature film that revolves around the untimely death and funeral of a middleaged homemaker. The bereaved, who mourn in front of her dead body, draw the spectators’ attention to her interactions with a tribal community in rural Wayanad in Kerala by re-enacting their memories of her. Although *Ithra Mathram* was a landmark in founding funerals and collective mourning as vital narrative events of Malayalam cinema, the film had a restricted viewership, primarily appealing to a niche critical circle.

<sup>49</sup> Don Palathara’s *Shavam* (2015) is an independent art film, with its backdrop centred around a funeral. The film, shot entirely in black and white, is a dark comedy on death and mourning similar to *Ee. Ma.Yau.*

<sup>50</sup> The title *Ee.Ma.Yau.* is an abbreviation of "Eesho Mariyam Yauseppe," which translates to Jesus Mary Joseph, and is a prayer, particularly whispered to the deceased.

transgression in these films, it is imperative to understand the historical tension between realism and melodrama. The schism has been crucial towards the formation of Kerala's public sphere and is constitutive of the spatial division of private and public spheres in Malayalam cinema. I will provide a brief trajectory of the conflict between melodrama and realism, both in the public sphere of the state and its cultural industries.

### **Melodrama versus realism**

The 'rational Malayali spectator' has been at the heart of the aesthetic distinction of Malayalam cinema, tethered as it remains to the predominance of realism. The Malayali self-definition is at least partly pivoted on the social realist tradition of Malayalam cinema<sup>56</sup>, which is often sized up as: i) against the neighbouring film industries<sup>57</sup>, particularly 'the irrationality of the Tamil audience' (Pandian 1992: 29)<sup>58</sup>; and ii) the interpellation of the Malayali spectator representing Kerala's progressive politics (Rowena 2002: 29). As a result, while cinema was mobilised chiefly as a medium for linguistic sub-nationalism in other south Indian states, it was projected as an apparatus of the state's developmentalist politics in Kerala.

The public discourse lionising secular rationality, vindicated by the Left political tradition, has been influential in turning realism into the dominant mode of address in Kerala. Joseph (2012) highlights the interventions of the communist party toward a populist consolidation:

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56. Social realism in Indian cinema denotes an aesthetic project that marked a thematic shift by focusing on the poor and the exploited, sustaining a melodramatic narrative (Prasad 1998). In Malayalam cinema, this movement began with interventions of the artists and writers associated with the Progressive Writing Group and Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC)—two bodies that were closely affiliated to the Communist Party in the state. Their interventions through popular cinema and other cultural mediums won a solid base for the party towards a populist mobilisation. At a time when Indian cinema was heavily invested in genres like mythologicals, stunt and adventure films, romances, the predominance of social realism, often addressing social, political, and economic issues faced by the common people, gave Malayalam cinema a superior status.

57. The south Indian cinema comprises four distinct film industries: Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu.

58. The irrationality of the Tamil audience is often projected in terms of a strong film star-fan relationship prevalent in the state. An intricate relationship between cinema and politics is peculiar to South India. As a result, popular cinema was a vital agent of linguistic mobilisation in states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

The aesthetic domain of social realism provided the Left-associated artists with a ground to negotiate with an industrial-cultural medium like cinema, marked by its popular, melodramatic excesses, and to mould a sphere of the 'new popular' that would address 'the masses' – the object of the Left's political mobilization – and, at the same time, negotiate the (high caste) middle class's position in the imminent modern nation of Malayalees (2012: 69).

In addition, a public sphere produced around various informal, everyday social spaces, including local tea shops, public libraries, and affiliated reading rooms, was projected as signifying the state's progressive political consciousness. These representational spaces that cultivated a collective reading practice predominantly through public reading of newspapers in the sixties and seventies were marked as manifesting the centrality of reading to the Malayali public culture. They were also regarded as symbolic of an emergent progressive modern secular public sphere with the diminishing of traditional social spaces defined by caste hierarchies.

Similarly, the Left-affiliated progressive movements like *Purogamana Kala Sahitya Sangham* (The Progressive Art and Literary Group) <sup>51</sup>, *Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad*, known as People's Science Movement, and the rationalist group *Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham* <sup>52</sup>, reformulated the spheres of the popular into a rational political space. Through the interventions of the artists and writers associated with the Progressive Writing Group and Kerala People's Arts Club<sup>53</sup>, the Left proposed a discourse of rationality, imagined as emanating from communism, as the uniting element of Malayali nationalism (Joseph 2012). It occasioned anxieties concerning the position of various communities/castes in the newly imagined

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<sup>51</sup> Kerala People's Arts Club (KPA) is a theatrical movement formed in the 1950s by a group of individuals closely associated with the Communist Party of India. The initiatives of KPAC writers and artists through theatre and popular cinema were influential in establishing the category of popular left in Kerala, through a populist consolidation of the Communist movement in the '60s and early '70s.

<sup>52</sup> *Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham* (Kerala Rationalist Association) is a rationalist organisation which propagates rationalism and humanism. It was founded in 1950 by Sahodaran Ayyappan and other progressive leaders to advocate for social reform through rationalism.

<sup>53</sup> The early initiatives of these artists in Malayalam cinema sought to address and educate the masses in the reformed idioms of popular cinema.

rational-secular Malayali nation, forming the narrative preoccupations of literary texts and social realist films. Besides, *Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad* (KSSP) emerged as the main conduit for Malayalees' public engagement with science from the 1960s to the 80s.<sup>54</sup> Through mass science education and various campaigns for civil action and community development programs, it proposed a rational public sphere cultivating public rationality and a secular conception of science (BijuKumar 2019).

However, the legitimacy of these rational, progressive public discourses has been widely contested. For instance, the discursive formation of a new public sphere around regional newspapers in the 1970s occasioned a major shift from the public engagement with science and rationality proposed by KSSP. Varughese (2017) maps out how the galvanisation of a scientific citizen public with the rise of newspapers as the primary locus of public engagement with science, in the backdrop of various environmental challenges in the 1990s, led to the decline of KSSP among the masses. Likewise, television, which became a key player with the popularity of satellite television in the 1990s, opened up a new deliberative sphere for public negotiation with scientific rationality in the state. Television retains an active media public sphere by mediating various controversies and deliberations over the public contestation of rational discourses. Also, the thriving of new media in the last two decades engendered a new digital public sphere, hosting various critical debates on science and rationality, and bringing out a significant change in the scientific-citizen public. Besides, the economic and social mobility achieved by various community groups has also been crucial in contesting the rational suppositions around the public sphere and the takeover of religion as an irrational category in the public domain.

It is imperative to examine how these rational postulations around the state's public sphere and their contestations are manifested in its cultural industries, especially popular cinema. How do they inform the historical tension between realism and melodrama in Malayalam cinema? Realism has found itself positioned

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<sup>54</sup> *Eureka*, a children's science weekly focusing on science fiction, and *Saasthra Keralam*, a science education magazine for school students, published by the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), aimed to develop scientific rationality through promoting scientific awareness among children.

in a hierarchical contest over cultural authenticity against melodrama since the early career of Malayalam cinema. Widely regarded as the 'affective economy of popular cinema' (Radhakrishnan 2012: 92), melodrama's ontological excess is used to relegate it within the private realm as a domestic genre of familial and emotional excess (Gledhill and Williams 2018). As a result, 'women's cinema'<sup>55</sup> – mainly romantic melodramas and 'tearjerkers' considered appealing to the female audience – was devalued by the literary and film critics against social realism's moral and aesthetic legitimacy (Joseph 2012: 110). Derived predominantly from pulp fiction and *painkili*<sup>56</sup> literature, the tearjerkers were positioned against the realist standards of canonical literary texts.<sup>57</sup>

Alongside, realism in Malayalam cinema has been repurposed to endorse a 'developmental aesthetic' (Prasad 1998: 189), claiming its exception against the star-fan relationship peculiar to other South Indian cinemas. Edachira, in her analysis of the middle-brow Malayalam cinema<sup>58</sup>, argues that realism manifested as the state's developmentalist trajectory, particularly amplified by the popularity of Kerala's developmental model, has been crucial in constituting "the figure of Malayali citizen-spectator" (2020: 4856). The privileging of realism over melodrama, positing the emotional and melodramatic articulations as the irrational domain, has been crucial in the rational self-positioning of Malayalam cinema and its spectatorial subject. Correspondingly, the repression of melodrama as the irrational remainder was staged via the spatial restructuring of the inside and outside as the respective realms of melodrama and realism, central to the foundational schism upon which the rational, secular public sphere has been mounted in Kerala. Their split mandate has

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<sup>55</sup> The melodramatic acting styles, exemplified by actors like Madhu, Sheela, Sathyan, etc., in the 60s and early seventies, are widely seen as a mode of excess with the dominance of realism in Malayalam cinema. Despite the popularity, it is viewed as symptomatic of the evils of aesthetics, followed by commercial cinema.

<sup>56</sup> *Painkili* is a term used to refer to the genre of titillating and sentimental romance novels.

<sup>57</sup> Some of these, written by P C Kuttikrishnan (known as Uroob), Ponkunnam Varkey, and Thakazhi Shiva Shankara Pillai, were turned into films and was representative of Malayalam cinema's social realism and progressive nature.

<sup>58</sup> The late 70's witnessed the rise of a new form of Malayalam cinema by adopting the market formula of commercial cinema and the realistic aesthetics of art cinema. Popularly known as middle brow cinema in the late 1970s and 1980s, these films reduced the divide between realism and melodrama, upheld by the arthouse practitioners. These films took over art cinema and became the trademark of Malayalam cinema in due time.

historically legitimised the repression of public mourning from Kerala's visual culture. The interior has thus been posited as the space of melodrama against the exterior: 'the privileged space of reality' (Radhakrishnan 2012: 94). Following this spatial division, mourning responses to death in Malayalam cinema have been equated predominantly with melodramatic gender roles that unfold in private, or else, they are adopted as a narrative device to justify the male protagonist's pronouncement of vigilante justice. In popular melodramas like *Narasimham* (2000) and *Dhruvam* (1993), the male hero's vengeance is set against the disrupted domestic harmony following the violent dismantling of the family. Vigilante masculinity in these films is valorised through the rhetoric of restoring the lost honour of a mournful interior/home/ region against the corporeal or symbolic violence unleashed by an outside force. Nevertheless, melodrama has left an undeniable imprint on Kerala's visual culture and popular imagination.<sup>59</sup>

As against the above, this chapter situates the eruption of community-centric mourning in *Ee.Ma.Yau.* and *Jana Gana Mana* as a manifestation of contemporary Malayalam cinema's preoccupation with public mourning. The community mobilisations around death in these films embody powerful conflicts and resistance of the bereaved against institutional structures.

### **A new narrative milieu**

The narrative preoccupations of Malayalam cinema underwent a discernible shift after 2010.<sup>60</sup> It has been predominantly an ideological shift marked by extensive engagements with new political questions, including gender, caste, region, politics, and religion. Moving away from the "deep-seated feudal values, apolitical posturing, chauvinism, sexism, and a revivalist impetus" (Ramachandran 1995:3) that defined

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<sup>59</sup> Despite the hegemony of social realism in the left discourses, many of the early political melodramas like *Neelakkuyil* (1954) and *Mudiyanya Puthran* (1961) that followed a melodramatic narrative were crucial in the political mobilization of the Left in Kerala and the self-fashioning of the communist hero as the locus of social change.

<sup>60</sup> The emergence of a new kind of cinema at the beginning of 2010, including *Traffic* (Rajesh Pillai 2011), *Chappa kurishu* (Sameer Thahir 2011) and *Neelakasham, Pachakkadal, Chuvanna Bhoomi* (Sameer Thahir 2013), featuring many new and young actors and bringing out key changes in the technological aspects of filmmaking, experiments with content, form and visual techniques were identified as the new generation Malayalam cinema. These films marked a significant departure from the long-standing dominance of two huge male superstars, Mammooty and Mohan Lal, and paved the way for new narrative concerns in Malayalam cinema.

the superstar-driven films of the 1990s and early 2000s<sup>61</sup>, the question of social justice and equality emerged as one of the dominant thematic concerns of Malayalam cinema. It is manifested via the increased production of women-centric films, challenging traditional gender roles and middle-class morality, and a corpus of films set against discrimination based on caste, class, and religion.

Most importantly, the social and cultural life of many marginalised community groups appeared to be the narrative concern of Malayalam cinema, especially Muslims and Dalits, following the increased subaltern visibility in the public sphere of Kerala in the past two decades. As a result, the public mourning event in the films mentioned above is set around a community, either material or abstract. I will discuss it in detail in the next section. Apart from a diegetic shift, the community groups forming a vital narrative trope of mourning in these films are also reflective of the changing cultural and political discourses in the state. Community groups, especially religious communities, have traditionally been positioned as an irrational contrast to the rational discourses surrounding the public sphere of the state. Although the social realist films of the 1960s and 70s consolidated a new linguistic and cultural identity for the Malayalees, minority community groups, including Muslims and Dalits, remained outside the purview of the imagined progressive state. As a result, the Muslim characters in popular cinema during the time were presented as trapped in various social evils prevalent among the community including, the dowry system, polygamy, illiteracy, and so on, a precondition to augment the reformist self of the upper caste male hero (*Umma* (1960), *Kandam Becha Kottu* (1961)). During the eighties, the Muslim and other backwards classes (hereafter OBC) Gulf migrants formed an allegorical community. Radhakrishnan (2020) maps out these community groups in Malayalam cinema, delineating how the Gulf region creates an aesthetic universe that exists at odds with the imagination of a ‘unified Kerala’.

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<sup>61</sup> Towards the close of the 1990s, middlebrow films were substituted by the superstar films which revolve around the hegemonic masculinity of the upper caste Hindu heroes. These films were dominated by the two huge superstars of Malayalam cinema, Mammooty and Mohanlal.

However, these communities made an appearance as a politically organised entity in a set of films that came out against the backdrop of the post-Mandal agitations, discussed later in detail (*Dhruvam*, 1993; *Usthad*, 1999; *Shradha*, 2000; *Dada Sahib*, 2000). The Dalit, OBC characters, in the popular comedies that ruled Malayalam cinema in the late eighties and early nineties, were, however, routinely represented as symbolic of the lower caste/ minority students in post-Mandal Indian campuses, essentially located outside the matrix of merit. Rowena (2002) examines how the increased presence of Dalit, OBC, and Muslim characters in colleges and university spaces in these films manifests the Post-Mandal Indian higher educational sector, where their reservation status and social locations are placed against the meritorious upper caste students.<sup>62</sup> The “hegemonic masculinity” in Malayalam cinema has thus been constructed around the figure of ‘others’ that involve (comedians and villains) who were most often drawn from non-hegemonic castes and religions

Community groups, including Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims, came to the forefront of Malayalam cinema by the 2000s. TV Chandran’s trilogy on the 2002 Gujarat riots (*Padam Onn Oru Vilapam* 2003; *Vilapangalkkappuram* 2008; *Bhoomiyude Avakashikal* 2012) highlighted the plight of the Muslim community in the wake of increasing communal polarisation, while the confrontations of Adivasis with the mainstream social order and developmental projects appeared in *Photographer* (2006) and *Papilio Budha* (2013). The gradual ‘awakening’ resulted in Malayalam cinema exploring the experiences and struggles of other marginalised communities and identity groups, moving away from its dominant engagement with the mourning cultures of upper-caste Hindus and Christians.<sup>71</sup> Hence, the foregrounding of the mourning cultures of Dalits, Muslims, Christians, and other lower-caste communities in the films discussed above contests the ‘secular’ qualification and its historical subjugation of other identity clusters.

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<sup>62</sup> Jenny Rowena explores the construction of hegemonic masculinity in Malayalam cinema through analysing the genre of laughter films, popular Malayalam comedies featuring the comic struggles of a group of incompetents, unemployed young men to make livelihood and celebrating male friendships.

This diegetic shift has been shaped by the cultural and historical developments in the public sphere of Kerala in the last two decades or so. The two historic events of the 1990s, the Mandal Commission recommendation of 27% reservation for Other Backwards Classes (1990) in central government services, the public sector, and educational institutions<sup>63</sup> and the demolition of Babri Masjid (1992)<sup>64</sup>, have had significant political, social, and religious ramifications in India. Both of these played a critical role in consolidating identity-based assertions and continue to inspire minority political mobilisations across India. The 27 per cent reservation for the OBCs was implemented to address the historical discrimination and inequality faced by socially and educationally backwards communities, including Dalits and Muslims, based on the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report. Although the declaration was met with widespread protests and violence from various upper caste groups who claimed that the reservation system was detrimental to merit, the affirmative political action aided minority communities' socio-political empowerment. In Kerala, the results were quite evident in higher educational institutions, where the swelling representation of Dalits, as well as OBCs, was crucial towards the formation of assertive counterpublics.

Similarly, in the backdrop of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, various religious and caste-based political assertions emerged in Kerala. The demolition of the Babri Masjid by the Hindutva mob (1992) led to widespread violence and riots across India, leading to a long-standing legal dispute between Hindu and Muslim groups over the ownership of the land. Although the southernmost state of Kerala was least affected by the violence that worst hit northern India, the event had many political ramifications. One of the key developments has been the formation of many new political movements building political alliances with other marginalised communities like Dalits and Adivasis. In tune with the Dalit Muslim political

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<sup>63</sup> In the year 1990, the prime minister, V.P Singh, announced the 27 per cent reservation for the Other Backwards Classes (OBCs) in jobs in Central government services and public sector, as well as educational institutions, to address the historical discrimination and inequality faced by many socially and educationally backwards communities.

<sup>64</sup> The Babri Masjid was demolished (1992) by the Hindutva groups, claiming that an ancient Ram temple once occupied the same site in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh.

coalitions formed during the post-Mandal period, these mobilisations opened up new public discourses on minority rights. Kiliyamannil (2022) points out how these political movements bring out a different language of community politics, challenging the majoritarian Hindutva mobilisations and articulating community questions in a constitutional language of rights.

The emergence of these political solidarities based on caste, religion, and regional identities significantly impacted the state's political landscape and reformulated various popular discourses on these communities. All these developments defied the rational postulation of the public sphere and its historical call for the privatisation of faith articulations from the public, questioning the contours of a secular democracy. They also paved the way for forming counterpublics, manifested predominantly via various cultural industries and social media platforms, which contest the hegemonic secular rationality around Kerala's public sphere.

In addition, these communities' cultural, economic, and political mobility also extensively contributed to their increased representation in the cultural industries. The economic and cultural agency that Muslims and OBC communities acquired manifested in their remarkable purchasing power. The remittance from the Muslim and OBC migrants to the Arabian Gulf countries in the 70s and 80s played a vital role in boosting the local economy and improving the living standards of the families of the migrants back in Kerala. The remittances have been utilised for various infrastructure development projects in Kerala, including the construction of houses, schools, hospitals, and mosques, which positively impacted the living conditions of these communities and the overall infrastructure of the state (Rowena 2002). It also paved the way for increased capital investment in varied cultural industries, leading to the rise of several community-owned regional newspapers, media houses, and many filmmakers and practitioners. All these reformulated the language in which these communities were earlier engaged and represented, resulting in their social life and cultural practices becoming a vital concern of

popular Malayalam cinema. <sup>65</sup> I locate the narrative and ideological shifts in Malayalam cinema after 2010 as manifestations of these political, economic, and cultural changes in the public sphere of the state. In the next section, I will analyse how mourning sites become powerful critiques of institutional violence and structural inequalities marked by the discontents of the indignant mourning public(s).

### **Mourning as a proxy**

The conflicts around a middle-class conjugal space following the death of a family member formed the diegetic concern in many popular melodramas of the seventies and eighties. Quite similarly, some of the realist films of the time<sup>75</sup>, including G Aravindan's *Pokkuvayil* (1982)<sup>76</sup> and *Chidambaram* (1985), revolve around the classic self-annihilating protagonist<sup>66</sup> lost in mourning and melancholia following the death of a dear one. A few sentimental melodramas like Padmarajan's *Moonnampakkam* (1988) and Sibi Malayil's *Aakashadooth* (1993), featuring mourning as an important narrative event, became cult classics. *Moonnampakkam* portrays a lonely grandfather's acute grief and breakdown, leading to his suicide following his grandson's death, drowning in the sea. *Aakashadooth* is set around the desperate efforts of a leukaemia-stricken mother, for the adoption of her kids before her death, while mourning her husband's death.

In addition, mourning formed a vital allegorical trope in a corpus of melodramas in Malayalam cinema, much similar to Indian national cinema after the 1947 partition. Sarkar (2009) maps out how mourning is fashioned predominantly around mourning the loss of a nation in the backdrop of partition in Hindi cinema, analysing the partition narratives in Bollywood and Bengali films made since the

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<sup>65</sup> The rise of films like *KL 10 Pathu* (Muhsin Parari 2015), *Sudani From Nigeria* (Zakariya Mohammed 2018), *Oru Halal Love Story* (Zakariya Mohammed 2020), and *Thallumaala* (Khalid Rahman 2022) by Muslim filmmakers marks the changes in the material, cultural and political conditions of the Muslim community in the state. These films extensively showcase the Malabar region, the northern part of Kerala, where the Muslim community forms a sizable chunk of the population. While the Muslim culture, language, cuisine, sartorial choices and spiritual and community life become a key narrative backdrop of these films, they also manifest the changing negotiations of the Muslim community with popular cinema.

<sup>66</sup> The self-annihilating protagonist is a common archetype in Indian romantic melodramas, often associated with failed romantic relationships. However, the term is used here to denote a protagonist in the process of self-destruction after the accidental death of a dear one, by cutting himself off from the world outside as a manifestation of his sense of mourning.

independence of India. He explains how the social traumas of the corporeal, material, and psychic losses are materialised in these cinematic mediations of partition, rendering the conformist silence around partition violence in the initial years. Although these concerns had no empirical resonance in Malayalam cinema, it was pervaded by a sense of mourning for a lost social order.<sup>67</sup> Mourning in G. Aravindan's *Utharayanam* (1975) and Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Elippathayam* (1981)<sup>68</sup>, the art cinema classics are set against the disenfranchisement of uppercaste/class male heroes in the wake of the social changes following land reformation and subsequent shifts in the land relations in Kerala. Whereas, the family spaces are a site to lament the pestiferous potential of the world outside in many commercially viable middle-brow films, which came out against the backdrop of large-scale migration to the Arabian Gulf (*Vilkkannund Swpnanghal* 1980; *Varavelpp* 1989).<sup>69</sup> With Gulf in their ideological positioning against modernity, mourning in these films manifested the anxiety of losing the regional grounding of the idealised Malayali culture and traditional feudal values (Radhakrishnan 2009).

On the contrary, mourning is centred around a community and its affective responses to the loss in contemporary Malayalam cinema. A transient mourning public is formed around death, which is distinct from a grief-stricken domestic space and its generational conflicts around the loss. Engaged either as a category of affect or as a societal concern regarding the appropriate handling of death through funeral rituals, mourning has been a collective expression of grief in the South Asian context. It encompasses public rituals, including ceremonial practices within the community, primarily involving the deceased's family, relatives, and neighbours. Unlike its conventional roles, mourning the loss turns into an active site of

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<sup>67</sup> Post-independence Kerala witnessed many social changes, particularly the decline of traditional social spaces defined by caste hierarchies and feudal land relations. The land reformation in the 1950s significantly transformed the agrarian landscape of the state. The surplus land with the feudal landlords were redistributed to landless farmers and land reform bills were introduced to curtail the unequal distribution of land. Many realist films of the parallel cinema movement of '70s and the middle brow family melodramas of the '80s manifested the 'landless' upper caste men's struggles to cope up with the new social order and their sense of mourning a lost glory.

<sup>68</sup> *Elippathayalam* features men in the grip of moral and existential crisis in the post-feudal era.

<sup>69</sup> The middle-brow films that came out during the large-scale Gulf migration manifested the aspirations and conflicts of the quintessential well-qualified yet unemployed upper/middle caste young hero.

subversion and resistance in *Ee.Ma.Yau.* and *Jana Gana Mana*, capable of challenging the traditional boundaries between the private and public spheres in contemporary Malayalam cinema.

### ***Ee.Ma.Yau.***

Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Ee.Ma.Yau.* drew significant critical attention as a satire on death and mourning, along with its extensive engagement with a lower caste Christian community's funerary practice, hardly a representational concern in popular Malayalam cinema. The film won two Silver Peacocks - the Best Director for Pellissery and the Best Actor (Male) Award for Chemban Vinod - at the 49th International Film Festival of India (IFFI) and the Best Director Award at the 48th Kerala State Film Awards. The narrative backbone of most of Pellissery's films is various community groups. While his *Amen* (2013) and *Angamali Diaries* (2017) feature the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, *Ee.Ma.Yau.* is set around the Latin Catholics, predominantly a fishing community in the film. The central protagonist in these films is the locus around which the community is explored regarding its aspirations, struggles, and discontents. *Ee.Ma.Yau.* uses many Christian images and symbols of death (Figure 9). The film begins with a funeral procession that enters from one end of the screen and exits through the other. It also ends with a mystical scene in which Vavachan and the gravedigger stand waiting at a seashore. Two boats sail towards them from two directions, and the audience's imagination is directed towards their afterlife. Following the death of Vavachan Mestri, an elderly Latin Catholic man, Eeshi, his son, becomes the linchpin of the narrative in *Ee.Ma.Yau.* and Vavachan's funeral turns out to be a spectacle of the conflicts and disintegration of the Latin Christian community in a fishing village called Chellanam in Kerala.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Ee. Ma.Yau.* shares a similar narrative trope with *Thithi*—both films are set in motion by the death of an eccentric village elder, with the deceased's son becoming the central figure. Each story revolves around arranging a funeral amid severe financial constraints.



**Figure 9:** Death is a recurrent motif in *Ee. Ma. Yau.* It begins with the fate of a duck that Vavachan carries home to cook for dinner in one of the first scenes. Apart from Vavachan, there are two other deaths in the film: the death of the local gravedigger who was assigned to dig Vavachan's grave and a dog.

In *Ee.Ma. Yau.*, made in a monotone, the narrative unfolds mostly within the interiors of a lower-caste Christian household up to the first quarter. Following the unexpected death of Vavachan, the family space turns into a public domain. The neighbours inform each other about the death and coordinate the funeral arrangements. The camera focuses on a group of people gathering and murmuring about a possible murder. Mourning is demonstrated mostly through the women characters' public display of grief, particularly their wailing in the form of a running commentary. While it offers them a language to participate in the funeral rituals and mass grieving, the competing claims over the authority and intimacy with the deceased in front of the dead body by his two wives and their loud lamentations turn mourning Vavachan's death excessively overt.

While the dead body is being taken to the cemetery for burial, accompanied by eerie music resembling an opera, Vavachan's second wife appears, alleging it is a suspected murder, resulting in a scuffle between his two wives and their families. Meanwhile, the furious Eeshi, Vavachan's son, slaps the parish's vicar for his relentless demand for a police investigation. Consequently, the vicar declares he will not allow Vavachan's body to be buried in the church cemetery. The narrative, thus, takes an unexpected turn with Eeshi's violent response to the church's repudiation of Vavachan's dead body, and the camera is promptly relocated to a community formation around the dead body. Vavachan's funeral thus becomes a public event as he is denied burial in the cemetery by the local church, following his son's violent response to the injustice. Eeshi buries his father's dead body in the yard of his own

house, protesting the violence meted out to the dead body. In a scene shortly before Vavachan's death, Eeshi and Vavachan elaborately discuss Vavachan's imaginary funeral. Eeshi promises him the most splendid funeral that their village has ever witnessed. For them, the grand funeral is a possible emancipatory spectacle that can break the materiality of their disadvantaged lives, although only in the fleeting moments of their final journey. Eeshi's desperate struggle to conduct the funerary rituals for his father reflects a deeply emotional filial response to his sense of loss. It is also a response to the strong desire of Vavachan for a funeral, accompanied by a first-class coffin (*shavappetti*), a top-tier musical band, a silver cross, and the presence of a bishop (*methran*), which suggests his wish for his posthumous self to command respect and dignity, something his living self was denied. By saving money for his own funeral, Vavachan seeks to ensure that his death becomes an occasion for communal mourning and recognition, even from the church that denied a space for burial. Eeshi's relentless efforts for a splendid funeral thus embody the subaltern imagination of death as a site of redemption, where the oppressed can reclaim the honour and visibility denied to them in life. In this way, Vavachan's funeral and its melodramatic spectacularism are not just a ritualistic site of mourning but a defiant assertion of dignity, reshaping conventional meanings of death and mourning in domestic or familial circles.

Beyond the individual rationality promoted by colonial modernity, the idea that well-observed funerary rituals are essential for the soul's attainment of salvation gained much traction in the popular imaginations of death in Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It challenged the feudal discourses surrounding death and mourning, which engaged the dead body solely in relation to caste and class identities. Thomas (2018) highlights how, unlike the feudal imaginations of funerals that reinforced caste-based rites and rituals, modernity brought attention to the bereaved's emotional experiences—expressed through acute grief or trauma following the loss of a loved one. He traces this structural shift to the rise and popularity of mourning poetry in Kerala, a genre that became a powerful vehicle for anti-caste sentiments related to death and mourning. This illustrates how, with the advent of colonial modernity, funerals began to be engaged beyond the question of caste-based body disposition

and death, and funerals came to be seen as crucial moments for the soul's manifestation of a meaningful afterlife.

The rise of a melodramatic community around Vavachan's dead body to give him a proper funeral, thus, turns out to be the spectacle of the structural inequalities that Latin Christians have historically been subjected to as a lower caste community.<sup>71</sup> The Latin Catholics, who predominantly constitute the fishermen population in the film, have been neither part of the mainstream attention nor the government's welfare schemes. As victims of the caste system among Christians, for Eeshi and the community, the local church's disavowal of Vavachan's dead body and his grave in the premises of his own house is symbolic of *themmadikkuzhi*, a pit for rogues operated by the church to dispose of the so-called rogue bodies.<sup>72</sup> His moral outrage and violent emotional reactions are directed against the untouchability, ostracisation, and structural inequalities the Latin community has historically been subjected to by the Christian community, the state, and broader civil society structures. Vavachan's funeral, therefore, emerges as the condensed site of the community's collective grief, lament, rage, and sense of denial.<sup>73</sup>

The transgressive energies of Eeshi's affective responses draw the spectatorial attention to how mourning transforms into a melodramatic spectacle of transgression, unlike the conventional displays of grief and ritualistic mourning. The shaky camerawork, fragmented by rapid cuts and unrestrained movement as Eeshi forcibly buries the body, lingers on the incommensurability of the agony and humiliation of the bereaved. Through the visceral intensities of Eeshi's emotional outpouring, Vavachan's death assumes a life after death, wherein his dead body becomes a powerful spectacle of the injustice undergone by his community. In these moments, when mourners are granted an undeniable public mandate to confront the

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<sup>71</sup> These alternative mourning responses embodying the bereaved's affective reactions to death often fall outside the boundaries of rationalised mourning or the sanctioned public expressions of grief observance.

<sup>72</sup> It is a special place in the graveyard for those who are denied permission to be buried in the church's cemetery, as they have arguably transgressed the church's teachings.

<sup>73</sup> Vavachan's lower-caste identity significantly influences the language used to describe his death. The vocabulary, such as *chathu*, *theernnu*, and *paadilla*—casteist slurs commonly applied to the deaths of marginalised groups like Dalits and lower-caste communities in Kerala—are used to refer to his passing. These are often contrasted with words like *marichu*, *antharichu*, *naadu neenghi*, and *kalam cheythu*, which denote the deaths of upper-caste and upper-class individuals and carry connotations of dignity and respect. These linguistic distinctions reflect how death is deeply embedded in the caste system in popular discourses.

violence they endure, grief transforms into a theatre of collective rage and defiance. It ruptures hegemonic mourning practices that demand grief's domestication, overpowering not only cultural and religious norms but also the state's prohibitions on collective mourning, its spatial confines, and its aesthetic regulations.

### ***Jana Gana Mana***

Despite the commercial formulas of a political thriller with an intended Pan-Indian audience, *Jana Gana Mana* (Dijo Jose Antony, 2022) stirred the popular imagination into various dynamics of contemporary politics.<sup>74</sup> The film earned significant box office success both in Kerala and the overseas market, reaching the Rs 50 crore milestone. <sup>75</sup> Additionally, its Netflix streaming received extensive critical appreciation, showcasing the supremacy of compelling content in connecting with a pan-Indian audience regardless of language or regional barriers.

*Jana Gana Mana* revolves around the police investigation and judicial proceedings on the murder of a college professor, Saba Maryam, after a brutal rape, divulging the duplicities of political and media narratives on truth and justice. The film is set in an imaginary public university in Karnataka, where the murder of an empathetic and socially responsible professor stirs widespread student unrest and mobilisations across the country. The conflict in the film escalates through the confrontation of a group of students with the university administration over their apathy to conduct a meticulous police investigation. The police clampdown on student uprisings seeking justice for the deceased evokes huge protests and demonstrations against police brutality across the country (Figure 10).

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<sup>74</sup> *Jana Gana Mana* is a legal thriller. The film, released in four South Indian languages is publicized as a Pan-Indian film for its content. Although the film is set in an imaginary central university in Karnataka, the characters speak Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada to cater to its intended Pan-Indian audience.

<sup>75</sup> The Malayalam film industry is a relatively small-scale enterprise and runs on a very low budget compared to other Indian film industries.



**Figure 10:** *Jana Gana Mana* extensively portrays the crackdown on student mobilisations, manifesting the suppression of student movements in higher educational institutions across India.

*Jana Gana Mana* starts in a very melodramatic environment that precedes the narrative as it opens with the victim's charred, dead body being found on a national highway by a passenger. The narrative thus turns out to be a spectacle of the heightened sense of loss and pain, accentuated by the melancholic background music, leading to the formation of a transient yet affective mourning community around the death. The rise of a student community who mourns Saba's death and their incessant demand for a scrupulous police investigation into the murder and the courtroom proceedings that put into question the morale of the police and the legitimacy of the media and political narratives form the crux of the film.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile, the mourning public's potential conflicts with institutional structures supplement the diegetic progression toward structural violence, including fake encounters, institutional murders, caste atrocities, and state violence. Although mourning is not the key narrative focus of the film, the interventions of a mourning public, which result in a national outbreak, provide the ground to critique the legitimacy of the narratives of justice by the police, media, and judiciary. The film that appears to adapt the stylistics of the campus film genre, much like *Queen*, a legal drama (Antony's only other film in Malayalam), slowly

<sup>76</sup> During Saba's condolence gathering at the university, melodrama transforms into a form of mourning, triggering the rise of intense affective solidarities against the gruesomeness of violence she had to undergo and justice being denied.

transitions into a courtroom drama in the second half. The mourning public that is pervasive across the narrative and their relentless struggles for justice is thus a trope to unveil how the police, media, and judiciary work together to maintain power in tandem by manipulating the murder of a citizen.

In both these films, public mourning is a proxy for the protestations against institutional structures. Unlike the sentimental melodramas in which mourning evolves predominantly around a melodramatic interior and the transformation death causes in the personal and social lives of the bereaving subjects, mourning is a communal activity in *Ee.Ma.Yau.* and *Jana Gana Mana*. Bringing out an evident shift in mourning responses and its spatial and aesthetic structuring, the conflict of this community with institutional mechanisms transpires mourning into a spectacular site of articulating loss and injustice. Mourning in *Ee.Ma.Yau.* is a condensed site of conflicts, discontents, and collective traumas of a marginalised community.<sup>77</sup> In *Jana Gana Mana*, however, the traumas are appropriated to consolidate the mourning events of political protestations via the struggles of a more secular and universal collective - the student community.

### **The affective solidarities in mourning**

In both the films discussed above, these conflicts animate potential solidarities around mourning. The broader solidarities and corporeal support are formed as an ethical response to the violence the deceased has undergone. Solidarity is discerned as one of the constitutive elements of social life by many social theorists (Marx 1848; Durkheim 1893; Simmel 1908). While Simmel observes religion as the binding factor for social order and class solidarity, the solidarity of the working class remains the cornerstone of the Marxist cultural theory (see Gramsci 1971). Despite being commonly recognised as vital to broadening democratic participation, solidarity is formed corresponding to specific cultural and political contexts.

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<sup>77</sup> With the rise of modernity body emerged as a site of political negotiation in Kerala, giving rise to various theoretical discussions on body politics. The concept of the soul as transcending the body—promoted by the individual rationality characteristic of colonial modernity—directly challenged the feudal notion that the body was superior to the soul. Consequently, both colonial modernity and Christianity (along with the growing influence of religions like Islam) undermined the feudal perspective that reduced bodies solely to caste identities. These historical and structural changes in body politics correspond with shifts in the ways death and mourning are understood and practiced, reflecting a new political consciousness introduced by colonial modernity in Kerala.

Nevertheless, in cases of unnatural deaths, mainly when the deceased has been a victim of grave injustice or violence, mourning transforms into a spectacle that has the potential to generate powerful conflicts and defiance (Prakash 2022).

In *Ee. Ma Yau.*, Eeshi buries his father's dead body in the yard of his own house, putting a cross made of wood, unlike the standard silver/ bronze or concrete cross, upon the grave as a protest against the church's repudiation of his father's dead body. Distinct from 'the mobilised (and mobilising) subaltern hero as an agent of national reconciliation and social reform' (Prasad 1998: 144), Eeshi becomes a violent antihero in *Ee.Ma.Yau.*, manifesting the visceral affects of a bereaving community and its conflict with various oppressive power structures and its unequal distribution of justice (Figure 11). Apart from Eeshi's filial response, the spectatorship of the injustice meted out to Vavachan's dead body triggers public outrage and ethical reckoning among the crowd at his funeral site. The spectacle subsequently forms broader affective solidarities, turning the mourners into a moral community informed by a shared sense of vulnerability and precariousness.



**Figure 11:** Eeshi's heightened emotional conflict, following his desperate efforts to provide his father with a dignified funeral, forms the film's climax. At this point, the burial of Vavachan descends into chaos, transforming into a spectacle for those around the dead body.

In *Jana Gana Mana*, a diverse and transient population, including a student community, the colleagues of the victim, and the bereaved family form the mourning community. The condolence gathering for Saba transforms into a powerful act of mass grieving wherein heightened emotions of the occasion give rise to fierce affective solidarities, uniting the attendees in shared outrage against the brutality she endured and the systemic denial of justice. Moving beyond a performative gesture, mourning her death transforms into a locus of mass mobilisation, embodying an active rejection of systemic oppression and a demand for justice. Mourning her death

thus transforms into a grand mobilizer of extensive student solidarity and public anger across the nation. The broader ethical solidarities formed are amplified further by huge sensationalism around her public life as a young, outspoken college professor who instilled revolutionary and democratic values among the students. Mourning thus becomes an active site of resistance shaped by extensive public outrage not just against the violence meted out to the deceased, but also against structural violence such as caste atrocities in higher educational institutions, or clampdown on student uprisings and so on (See Figure 12).



**Figure 12:** The mobilisations of the grieving students for justice are portrayed as spectacular events of melodramatic transgressions against the institutional structures.

Apart from the personal intimacy with the deceased, these solidarities are constituted by the mourning public's ethical responses to the gruesomeness of the violence that the victim had to undergo. It animates a heightened sense of poignancy and rage, which mobilises the affective solidarities of a wider collective of mourners (Figure 13). The film's adaptations of many real-life incidents from the contemporary socio-political landscapes, hence, are cleverly used to contribute to its

pan-Indian appeal.<sup>78</sup> Although the emotionally stimulating courtroom sequences and the overbearing persona of the defence lawyer bear a resemblance to mass heroes in popular melodramas<sup>79</sup>, *Jana Gana Mana* demonstrates how the state uses police vigilantism to manipulate public sentiments to bank on votes while allowing impunity and lawlessness to prevail.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, while Saba's death consolidates extensive public solidarity and mourning, the suicide of Vidya, a Dalit student in the film, following caste discrimination in the same university, does not evoke any public outrage or mass mobilisation. *Jana Gana Mana* also reveals the unequal distribution of mourning and ethical solidarities, critiquing how certain deaths become worth mourning while others remain non-grievable, or not worth mourning, as Butler (2016) puts it.<sup>80</sup>



**Figure 13:** The melodramatic heft of the film commences with a scene in which Saba's mother identifies her daughter's charred, dead body. The scenes depicting her mother's grief and emotional outbursts, even those within the courtroom, are presented in a markedly melodramatic manner. The melodramatic appeal of these scenes plays a substantial role in consolidating the populist sentiments against Saba's murderers and expanding the film's scope beyond a conventional legal thriller.

<sup>78</sup> The subplot on the suicide of a Dalit student, Vidya, in the film draws clear parallels from the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student at Hyderabad Central University, following caste discrimination. The plot of Saba's murder is a cinematic mediation of the 2019 Hyderabad gang rape case and the 'extrajudicial execution' that followed the incident (Padalingam 2022). The gruesome gangrape and murder of a young doctor by a group of lorry workers at a national highway in Hyderabad in Telangana had sparked huge outrage across the country.

<sup>79</sup> The second half of the film features extended courtroom sequences filled with the emotionally intense performance of the defense lawyer Arvind Swaminathan (Prithviraj Sukumaran). His long monologues to prove Saba's death has been manipulated by the state for political gains contribute to the mass commercial appeal of the film while also elevating Prithviraj's stature as a mass hero.<sup>91</sup> The escalation of public outrage and the permeating sense of mourning culminate in a momentary relief for the public in *Jana Gana Mana* with the killing of the culprits in a fake police encounter that is manipulated to win the public sentiment. However, the courtroom proceedings that unfold through the ostensibly melodramatic acting style and monologues of the defence lawyer, advocate Aravind Swaminathan, contest the violence entrenched in the glorification of extra-judicial killings and instant justice.

<sup>80</sup> The social construction and distribution of grief is defined by the rational interpretive frameworks of the state and the sense of moral legitimacy in defining a loss as grievable or non-grievable.

Moreover, these films embrace melodrama both as an aesthetic device and a narrative form. Manifested through heightened emotion, intensified performance, overt passions, and expressionist style of filmmaking, melodrama is a powerful form of mourning for the bereaved. It emerges as a powerful cultural force in these films during the confrontations of the mourning publics with power structures, marked by the excess of their melodramatic transgressions and their subversive energies. Interestingly, these films bring out a new aesthetic of melodramatic realism via mourning sites, which is quite different from the realist aesthetics of late twentieth century parallel cinema. A strict demarcation between realism and melodrama marked the narrative mode of realism in parallel cinema. As a result, the grief and emotional responses of the bereaved are marked by a slow pace, limited dialogue, and low-key performance. The mourning responses are also entailed by the observational camera, stylised lyrical visuals, and editing that encompass the emotional turmoil of the bereaving subjects. As opposed to this, the melodramatic form adopted by Malayalam cinema since 2010 brings out a renewed melodramatic aesthetic. For instance, black humour is a significant aesthetic device in marking melodrama in *Ee.Ma. Yau*. As a satire built around a death and funeral, the comic effect is created from many dark elements.<sup>81</sup> The loud wailing of the female characters, the heated argument between his wives and children, and their exchange of filthy words in front of the dead body, and so on, elicit a morbid sense of humour among the spectators.<sup>82</sup> Simultaneously, the depiction of the socio-cultural milieu of a coastal village upholds *Ee.Ma. Yau*.’s realist credentials. The spectral atmosphere of a maritime culture, communicated through crashing waves, dark clouds, and windy storms, is also underscored by the sonic environment of the coastal belt.<sup>83</sup>

The sites of public mourning in both films are amplified by an unruly crowd, whose chaotic and turbulent outpouring of emotion consolidates ethical solidarity

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<sup>81</sup> In a scene in which Vavachan’s body is carried out for burial, the coffin gets crushed, and the dead body falls off. The efforts to tuck the body fit into the coffin led to a total commotion, triggering laughter among the spectators.

<sup>82</sup> The high-pitched and rhythmic wailing of Vavavachan’s wife Pennamma, the vanity of his daughter-in-law, who is worried about wearing sufficient jewellery during the funeral, and the brief romance of his daughter amidst the funerary rituals elicit a comic effect out of dark elements.

<sup>83</sup> Shyju Khalid’s cinematography, capturing the crashing sea, endless rain, and the night shots through the glimmer of a torch, offers a sensory exploration of the geographical setting, intensifying *Ee.Ma. Yau*.’s poignant essence.

around dead bodies (Figure 14). The scuffle between Vavachan's wives, children, and the villagers in front of his dead body turns the mourning public into an unruly crowd. However, following Eeshi's visceral response to Vavachan being denied a dignified funeral, they transform into an affective community. *Jana Gana Mana's* adoption of the melodramatic mode is marked by the heightened emotional and visceral eruption of a massive public. It is also evident in the emotionally charged appeals of Advocate Swaminathan during the courtroom scenes. However, weaving a Pan- Indian narrative through a sequence of real-life incidents of structural violence across the country enables the film to engage a more extensive audience, facilitating a connection that surpasses regional constraints.



**Figure 14:** The scuffle between Vavachan's wives, children, and the villagers in front of his dead body turns his mourning into a chaotic event, and the mourners descend into an unruly crowd, which is further intensified by the melodramatic performance of grief and rage.

### **The shifting targets and new diegetic territories**

The diegetic shifts in Malayalam cinema since 2010 are also reflected by the industry's expansion to a nationwide audience demography. The shift to Internet TV and the proliferation of OTT streaming platforms<sup>84</sup> offered unprecedented visibility to Malayalam cinema in recent years. Although this growth parallels the increasing attention towards regional cinema content, the popularity of digital streaming platforms has profoundly enabled Malayalam cinema to engage a transregional

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<sup>84</sup> The availability of high-speed mobile internet at affordable prices and reliable internet connections led to an exponential rise in internet users across the country with the highest internet penetration rate in the state of Kerala. The flexibility to watch anywhere at the viewer's convenience, uninterrupted, ad-free viewing experience, and availability of a vast range of content to a broad audience with diverse tastes and interests soon transpired these platforms into the preferred mode of entertainment.

audience. Unlike Hindi or other South Indian counterparts, which have enjoyed a much bigger reach, the Malayalam film industry operates on a smaller scale, largely confined within Kerala. Operating on relatively lower production budgets without major studios' involvement, the industry is largely driven by individual producers. Most of the Malayalam films were released only within Kerala and were watched by a limited Malayalam-speaking audience.

For other South Indian film industries, voice dubbing has been a significant avenue to access the wider national market, particularly for Telugu and Tamil industries, which have a thriving populist idiom of action comedies (Srinivas S. V. et al; Ganti 2021). Dubbing enabled these industries to make significant strides with the Hindi-speaking audience in particular, especially among the television audience (via channels like SET Max) through the early 2000s and later at the rundown exhibition centres across north India (see Kumar 2016). The prospect of Malayalam cinema exceeding the regional market, however, remained distant until recently. This could be attributed to the fact that Malayalam cinema was generally tailored to the Malayali audience. More importantly, its reach was constrained by the absence of a populist idiom, owing to the industry's relative preference for realism. As subtitling gained momentum via OTT platforms, however, Malayalam cinema's viewership has expanded greatly. The recent rise of a subtitle-reading audience has found in Malayalam cinema a stylistic as well as thematic novelty, which has led to considerable critical acclaim.

The resultant facelift for Malayalam films has fed into the relatively niche popularity on premier movie portals like *The Film Companion*, *The Lallantop Cinema*, *Galatta Plus*, and so on (Figures 15 &16).<sup>85</sup> In an interview for the *Hindu Daily*, film critic Anupama Chopra talks about Malayalam cinema:

What I love about new-age Malayalam cinema is that it is unvarnished storytelling. I think some of the most exciting work in India is being done there right now. There's no veneer; the people in these movies look and

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<sup>85</sup> It includes the reviews and recommendations in popular movie portals like *Film Companion* by the noted film critic Anupama Chopra (in English) and *The Lallantop Cinema* in Hindi, *The Galatta Plus* by Bharadwaj Rangan and so on.

behave like real people. But there is great dramatic heft. The storytelling grips you without the seduction of glamour or fantasy. And they're so beautifully shot! (2021).



**Figure 15:** A screenshot of the viewer's comments on Bharadwaj Rangan's review of *Jana Gana Mana* in the popular film portal *Galatta Plus*.



**Figure 16:** A screenshot of the viewers' comments on Anupama Chopra's review of *Ee*.

This growing recognition across India led to a notable shift in the content strategy of Malayalam cinema. It provided some latitude for the filmmakers to experiment with topics that deviate from expectations that have traditionally accompanied theatrical releases, which led to many generic and creative experiments in Malayalam cinema (Sreedhar 2022). The industry's transition from star-value dependent single-screen theatres toward a multiplex-driven economy by the late 2000s had also supported the economic feasibility behind experimental filmmaking (see Vishwanath 2007). It engendered vital experiments in thematic and formal techniques, but also in casting choices of Malayalam cinema after 2010.

All these contributed towards reviving the “progressive” premises around Malayalam cinema through a new melodramatic aesthetic that appeals to a wider audience demographic. Hence, films like *Jana Gana Mana*, set in an imaginary yet universal context, adopt mourning as a potential trope to engage with diverse political questions in an absurdly generic style, manifesting the revitalised content and aesthetic strategy of Malayalam cinema. It also effectively uses the cinematic profile of Prithviraj Sukumaran, which exceeds the language territories of Malayalam cinema. The Pan-Indian appeal of *Jana Gana Mana*, without relying on the grandiose spectacles, mass production budget, and star-studded ensemble of the generic action-filled Pan-Indian films, is thus underscored as the preeminence of Malayalam content. Unsurprisingly, then, films like *Jana Gana Mana* overshadow *Ee.Ma.Yau.*, whose loyalty to Latin Christian life in a coastal village appears to be culturally alien beyond Kerala. *Jana Gana Mana* enables something akin to a populist idiom mounted on the mourning public, which sets aside the problem of cultural opacity and makes it *legible* to a wider public, even if at the cost of fair representation.

The crucial question here is about the trend initiated by *Ithra Mathram*, which captured the interest of a minute critical circle<sup>86</sup>but has now been overwritten by popular melodramas. The latter blur the distinction between melodrama and

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<sup>86</sup> *Ithra Mathram* is an adaptation of Kalpatta Narayanan’s eponymous novel that revolves around the funeral of a middle-aged woman. The film progresses through a realist narrative.

realism, adopting melodrama as a mode of address at moments of heightened conflict, the renditions of which were earlier considered the reserve of realism. The rise of ethical solidarities and affective mobilisations around dead bodies has thus turned out into a dominant theme of melodramas like *Jana Gana Mana*, regardless of the critical acclaim *Ee.Ma. Yau.* garnered through both theatrical release and OTT premiere. Hence, apart from the material and political changes, these diegetic changes in Malayalam cinema are also fostering a new ecosystem fostered by the streaming platforms and changed audience demography.

Against such a conducive environment, contemporary Malayalam films adopt the formation of an affective community in mourning as a proxy to mark the eruption of various community mobilisations. They contest the historical privileging of realism over melodrama, which reduces the emotional and melodramatic articulations to the irrational domain. Centred around the melodramatic eruptions of a mourning public and the spectacularism of their emotional outpouring, both *Ee.Ma.Yau.* and *Jana Gana Mana* challenge the spatial restructuring of the private and the public as respective realms of melodrama and realism, key to the rational self-positioning of Malayalam cinema and its spectatorial subject. More importantly, the negotiations of Malayalam cinema with the conflicts and ruptures of the marginalised communities have been undertaken through evident melodramatic transgressions of the rational premises. The eruption of collective mourning practices that embody the shared traumas and vulnerabilities of a community at the heart of both *Jana Gana Mana* and *Ee.Ma.Yau.* thus, contest the repression of public mourning across the state's public sphere.

This shift also corresponds to the declining legitimacy of rational, secular discourses that validate the division between melodrama and realism and enable the repression of melodramatic mourning in the public sphere. Therefore, the cultural shifts discussed in this chapter need to be also understood as an enduring conflict with the rational interpretive frameworks, and a significant change in the language in which these conflicts are addressed and engaged in the public sphere of Kerala. The eruption of community-centric mourning in contemporary Malayalam cinema is vital

as a historical response against the postulation of reason as the critical element in the cultural regulation of the mourning subjects.

### **Conclusion**

Both the films discussed above – *Ee.Ma.Yau.* and *Jana Gana Mana* – defy the historical repression of subjective traumas and public mourning through a reckoning with structural violence, collective hurt, and ethical community formation around the dead body. Therefore, I find the eruption of collective mourning responses at the heart of these films as a political and cultural response to the violence entrenched in Kerala's public sphere, built on the privileging of realism and secular rationality. Contrary to the institutional regulations and surveillance in the purview of the 'rational' public grieving, spectacular eruptions of public mourning in these films demand a melodramatic community affiliation around the dead body. The community-centric mourning traditions in these films, therefore, shun the abstract locus of the progressive discourses of Kerala, and their permeation into the public sphere contests the rational cleansing of the public sphere.

Bringing these films into correspondence with the ongoing shifts in the Malayalam film industry in terms of the industrial, socio-historical, and political contexts is vital. Both *Ee.Ma. Yau.* and *Jana Gana Mana* are the extensions of an ideological change in contemporary Malayalam cinema to engage with new political questions and the shift towards a dynamic streaming ecosystem. Also, the economic and political mobility of certain community groups and their unprecedented social and media visibility, which resulted in the emergence of new political discourses on minority rights, have been crucial in bringing these community groups to the narrative concerns of Malayalam cinema. Against such a backdrop, the melodramatic spectacles of collective mourning in contemporary Malayalam cinema, as I have established, disentangle the spatial and aesthetic restructuring of realism and melodrama and the private and public mourning.

In the next chapter, I will address the melodramatic appeal of visual populism consolidated upon the mourning and commemoration of slain Communist Party workers, which mobilises a symbolic economy of martyrdom for the Left in Kerala with substantial affective and material footprints.

## Chapter 4

### **Memorialising Political Martyrdom: Visual Media and Party Politics in Kerala**

This chapter examines the ceremonial reverence accorded to victims of political violence in Kerala, which transforms them into martyrs through a mass-mediated cultural process. An examination of the visual culture of martyr discourses consolidated around the murders of the party workers of communist parties in Kerala reveals how commemorative rituals and symbolic mourning generated around death transform martyrdom into a political spectacle of massive visual appeal. I argue that the fostering of martyr cults imbues them with active political agency within the local cultural and political milieus and, therefore, contributes significant symbolic value to the political identity of the Left in Kerala. This chapter demonstrates how visually embodied sites enable populism via commemorative rituals of collective mourning as well as the memorialisation of martyr imagery.

Unlike the national consolidation of the Hindutva politics under a homogenised Hindu cultural identity, the south Indian state of Kerala has posed key constraints to the electoral success of the right-wing political parties. While it is often attributed to the state's distinctive socio-political trajectory, shaped by an enduring legacy of communist politics and social reform movements, this divergence owes, to a great extent, to the ways how mass mobilisations around religious majoritarianism have been outweighed in the state. Yet, regardless of the lack of formal political dominance, Hindutva has made notable ideological inroads into the state through organised efforts in promoting cultural nationalism. The locus of these mobilisations was faith based social collectives and broader narratives of cultural marginalisation, similar to their strategies anywhere else in the country. The political mobilisations upon a long-standing trajectory of political violence between cadres of the Marxist Left represented by CPI(M) and the Bhartiya Janata Party (the electoral affiliate of the Hindu right) has leveraged their attempts to nationalise their narratives of victimhood in a state, widely identified as a left bastion, holding vital imbrications to their political legitimation.

Political murders in Kerala are marked by decades old string of political vendetta and retaliatory killings, which are often extensions of rivalry in local politics, conflicts over political ideologies and power struggles for grass root political dominance. The history of political violence in Kerala dates back to the 1960s. Since then, the term has largely been associated with conflicts between the cadres of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Bharatiya Janata Party, although other political parties like the Indian National Congress, Indian Union Muslim League, key stakeholders in the parliamentary politics of the state and other minor community-centred political parties such as the Popular Front of India are also involved in this conflict in various capacities. Most of this violence is therefore unravelled in the areas/ pockets that form a ‘bastion’, a stronghold of either CPI(M) or RSS, where social life is indistinguishable from political life. Ruchi Chaturvedi (2023) in her analysis of the unique character of the long standing conflict between CPI (M ) and RSS in Kerala delineates how political murders often precede disputes related to the public display of party colours, flags and symbols in public spaces, on walls at polling booths and counting centres during election periods, along with conflicts arising from supporters changing their loyalties between political groups. She notes that the underlying rationale of participation in acts of retaliatory killings is to keep equal scores of those attacked or killed. She argues that the banalization of the sporadic brutality of this cycle of violence has contributed to the formation of antagonistic majoritarian communities, shaped through rival parties’ mobilization strategies that combine the distribution of care with performances of aggressive masculinity in their contest for electoral and popular power.

However, a symbolic economy of political martyrdom has been built upon these murders through a mass-mediated cultural process, which transforms its victims into martyrs, leveraging the ideological consolidations of both the Left and the Right on many grounds. This chapter explores the conditions by which the communist parties in Kerala , in contrast to right-wing formations, is able to more successfully appropriate and mobilize this symbolic economy through the visual practices of political martyrdom. Its key focus is on a remarkable visual populism

crystallized around the cultural discourses of political martyrdom, developed by communist parties in Kerala, which function as affective infrastructure for their ideological formations and as the corporeal anchors of their populist identity.

In order to do this, I examine the visual practices of political martyrdom consolidated around the deaths of two-party workers of distinct Communist parties: the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Revolutionary Marxist Party, namely T.P Chandrasekharan (2012) and Abhimanyu (2018) and their enduring resonances in contemporary political and visual media landscapes. Although Kerala has witnessed many recent instances of political martyrdom, reflecting the state's enduring history of political killings, this chapter focuses on these two specific figures due to an extensive visual economy of martyr discourses constructed around their deaths and their continued resonance within contemporary political discourses.

T.P Chandrasekharan (Popularly known as T.P in Kerala politics), a rebel communist leader and the former CPI(M) area committee member in Onchiyam of Kozhikode district, was brutally hacked to death by a group of CPI(M) local leaders and party workers. He had formed a splinter communist party called the Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP), following disagreements with the CPI(M) local leadership. The electoral ascendancy of his party in local governing bodies posed a potential threat to the CPI(M)'s political hegemony in the region, precipitating the party's violent retaliation against the dissident leader. His execution emerged as a political spectacle, triggering massive emotional outpourings and extensive martyrological practices that hailed him as a defiant communist martyr in the state's political and cultural landscape. Even thirteen years after his murder, the site in Vatakara where he was stabbed to death has been institutionalised as a political memory through the construction of a three storeyed building called T.P memorial square, alongside the significant political debates that his martyrdom continues to generate during successive election cycles and in the context of electoral politics. His death anniversary, observed annually on 4<sup>th</sup> May is commemorated as Martyrs' Day by RMP and marked by a repertoire of visual tributes, memorial practices, rallies and

public events along with political biopics that came out as film melodramas reinforce his martyrdom within contemporary political discourses<sup>87</sup>.

The murder of Abhimanyu, an undergraduate student of Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, who was a member of the Students Federation of India (SFI), the student wing of CPIM also witnessed the rise of a remarkable visual tropes of martyrdom. His murder was preceded by a tussle between the members of SFI and Campus Front of India, the student wing of an Islamist political organisation named Popular Front of India, following the fights over graffiti that welcomed newcomers, leading to fierce confrontations. It was soon perceived to be part of political violence within the context of politically active college campuses in Kerala and was imbued with the qualifier of martyrdom against communalism<sup>88</sup>. Apart from the political debates sparked by his murder, which positioned him as a martyr symbolising resistance to communal politics and factionalism, the ritual consecration of his martyrdom was reinforced by a remarkable circulation of various visual tributes such as posters and graffiti throughout the streets of Kerala. It was followed by the communist party and the Student Federations of India commemorating his legacy in many college campuses and their circulation across digital platforms. It was also materialised in the renaming of public spaces such as libraries and town squares, performative welfare acts to his family, political biopics such as *Njan petta Makan* (Aradhya 2019) and *Padma Vyoohathil Abhimanyu* (Aradhya 2019).

It is this remarkable density of visual- cultural practices of political martyrdom formed around their death, in the form of media spectacles of their funerals, affective economies of mass grief and the subsequent consolidations of a

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<sup>87</sup> While both Chandrashekharan and Abhimanyu are venerated as martyrs of the Communist parties, the narratives of their sacrifice emerge from different ideological motivations. Notably, Chandrasekharan was killed by a faction aligned with his own party, despite their shared ideological commitments. Nevertheless, the dissident communist party that he founded, RMP, adopted the communist cultural praxis to construct his martyr cult, budling a legacy of visual politics upon his hagiographies as a communist vanguard.

<sup>88</sup> Both these murders differ from conventional political killings resulting from the violence between the cadres of CPIM and BJP vying for territorial dominance in the regional strongholds of their respective parties

martyr cult, manifested through visual memory artifacts, cinematic adaptations, martyr museums and many other ritualised remembrance practices that forms the core of our analysis. Taking insights from these visual cultural interactions of mass mourning and commemoration of their deaths, I grapple with the visual construction, affective mobilisation and sensory circulation along with the institutional dynamics of fostering a martyr tradition within Kerala's political culture.

Thus, I demonstrate how the extensive reliance on the visual tropes of martyrdom enables the Left to mediate their hagiographies as affective- sensorial networks, contributing to the performative Left populism that actively contributes to the political and ideological consolidation of the party. I argue that the Left's historical success in populist consolidation in the state also could be seen as rooted on this visual populism: its ability to territorialise revolutionary memories through sensory rich practices embedding communist ideology in the everyday lives. This chapter demonstrates how the visual sensory regimes of political martyrdom act not just as embodied sites of ideological consolidations, but also as corporeal anchors for the communist parties' affective presence in Kerala's political imaginary via the conversion of bodily sacrifice into territorial power and regional identities. subsequently, these enquiries offer crucial insights into how populist politics have the potential to be enabled, both symbolically and materially, through visually embodied sites forged by the commemorative rituals of collective mourning as well as the memorialising potential of martyr imagery, manifesting the unique dynamics of melodramatic political cultures of South Asia.

### **Political murders and contentious 'martyrdom**

Before analysing the mass-mediated cultural processes through which Chandrasekharan and Abhimanyu are ritually consecrated as martyrs, it is vital to understand the contested nature of the symbolic meanings of martyrdom imbued to their deaths. The visual iconography of martyrdom, constructed around their deaths unravels as populist spectacles, which are sensorially marked by the Malayali public. It fashions their affective and ideological relationship with the communist party.

While recognizing that these ceremonial practices of mass mourning and memorialisation are embodied performatives of martyrdom, a brief account of the ontological, cultural, and historical meanings of martyrdom is necessary to understand the broader socio-political contexts in which victims of political violence are constituted as martyrs.

The reverence accorded to a martyr is predicated upon their sacrifice for a cause that is impactful to a significant number of people. They are exalted for it because in their individual sacrifice is represented a convergent act of collective resistance. This act not only substantiates the gravity of the cause by commodifying it in the implicit value of life over death, but also provides a locus to further mobilise the movement, which is then organically commemorated through hagiographies to be continually re-appraised in collective memory. Therefore, the act of sacrificing one's corporeal existence and enduring extraordinary suffering for a specific ideology turns the martyr's body into a cultural object by which belief and sacrifice gain material form (Naveh 1992; Mitchell 2012). However, as Casquete (2009: 265) argues, there are no intrinsically martyrial acts per se, rather acts that are the product of a specific mnemonic community which, in order to satisfy a need for integration and meaning in the present, retrospectively interprets certain acts as such, ritually institutionalising and engraving them on a collective memory. This reveals that the martyr is slippery term, often hard to define, because it emerges from a range of historical, political and theological contexts. The enquiries on who qualifies as a martyr thus require an analysis of the role of the left behind individuals and communities in the cultural mediations of martyrdom towards their respective religious, social and political agendas.

Mourning martyrdom, with its genealogy predominantly in religious traditions, is integral to different community traditions and their institutionalised memories. They are also effectively integrated into their mobilisation strategies. Middleton (2013) explores how martyrdom is socially mediated through theological legacy and collective memory across the Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions,

while Mitchell (2012) delineates the different cultural and political trajectories of portraying, remembering and contesting martyrdom across historical contexts. Martyrdom has been key to many political cultures within increasingly secular, political and materialistic contexts as well (Asad 2007; Jurgensmeyer 2008, 2017). According to more secularised modern conceptions, martyrs are not marked merely by their veneration as a religious symbol of sacrifice, but rather political figures that reveal the intersections of death, politics, and memory. As Smith argues: “For all its religious and theological overtones, [martyrdom] is at heart a public and political spectacle” (1999:10).

As an extension, the term political martyr is used to refer to someone who sacrifices their life or suffers severe persecution for a political cause, ideology, or movement, thereby transforming into a symbolic figure whose legacy is instrumentalised to mobilise collective action, legitimise resistance, or sustain ideological narratives. A political community that mourns their death as martyrdom assumes a collective character and achieves ritual sovereignty in its integrational association with specific political ideology (Verdery 1999). Murphy (2022) analyses how political communities enshrine certain deaths in their collective memory, where they subsequently contribute to communal solidarity, identity formation, and political mobilisation. He argues that political martyrdom consists of several components: (1) a death, occurring in what we might call “unnatural” circumstances, connected in some way to an individual’s identity(ies) or political commitments; (2) consecration of that death by a community or sub-community; and (3) transmission of accounts of that death across time, through processes of commemoration (2022: 465).

Martyrdom in India's political and cultural history is imagined primarily around the idea of revolution and the associated violence in the backdrop of the anti-colonial struggle (Maclean 2016; Ghosh 2017). Maclean (2016) explores how Bhagat Singh’s execution became a pivotal moment in the political and cultural imagination of Indian independence, as his death was elevated to the status of martyrdom that embodied the ideals of revolutionary resistance and the unavoidability of political

violence in the struggle for independence<sup>89</sup>. Ghosh (2018) analyses the interplay between political violence and the formation of the modern nation-state through the activities of an underground radical political movement led by the militant Badralok dacoits of colonial Bengal in the early and mid-twentieth century. These works highlight how political violence and martyrdom, integral to the anti-colonial history of India, serve as a radical form of protest distinct from the non-violent resistance movements that dominate the nationalist historiography.

In Kerala, the term martyr has been embedded in the political vocabulary as frequently linked to revolutions, intertwining the history of the communist party with that of revolutions and martyrs. The Malayalam phrase *rakthasakshi*, the one who is witness to their blood fuelling the cause of justice, manifests the idea of an exemplary revolutionary action. This phrase has found considerable traction in the Left political discourses of class struggle and peasant uprisings. Menon (2018), in his analysis of the pre-violence surrounding the political martyrs as a political tradition, delineates how the Communist Party in Kerala fostered a tradition of martyrdom by recognising the party workers and peasant labourers who were killed in police encounters or executed under colonial law in medieval Kerala as martyrs. He points out how the medieval traditions that celebrated heroes who had fallen in battle and those who had been killed for transgressions continued in the communist discourse of martyrs, resulting in the notion of martyrdom being revered as a revolutionary ideal pivotal in shaping modern Kerala during its shift from colonial feudal systems to a more egalitarian society. These figures are projected as key to the party's populist mobilisations and kept alive through a recurrent sense of mourning their loss and venerating their sacrifices through the martyr imagery in the public spaces. Visual media has played a crucial role in sustaining their hagiographies in popular memories through memorial squares, posters, murals, revolutionary songs, popular cinema and so on.

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<sup>89</sup> Her analysis primarily draws on the ideologies, ambitions, and methods of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA)—the revolutionary organisation established by Chandra Shekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh—situating it within the broader context of transnational anti-imperial dissent.

However, against the backdrop of a prolonged history of political murders in the state, the communist parties, BJP and the other actors involved in political violence have incorporated the murders of their cadres into the larger narrative of martyrdom. Despite employing distinctive modes to mobilise melodramatic narratives of victimhood predicated on a sense of threat and innocence, these parties have developed their own symbolic economies of political martyrdom that are vital to their political identities and consolidations of power. Unsurprisingly, across Kerala, these killings predominantly involve young individuals from marginalised social and caste backgrounds, often referred to as the 'foot soldiers' of a political party, who are actively involved in the party's mobilisation efforts. Devika (2010) argues that the paradox whereby Dalits and lower-caste cadres within the CPI(M) in Kerala frequently become victims of political violence exposes entrenched social hierarchies, revealing the interplay of caste, class, and political allegiance, despite the party's claims of commitment to the upliftment of marginalised communities and social justice.

Nevertheless, the mass mediation of their deaths into martyrdom, particularly through visual cultural mediums, have effectively leveraged the communist parties to harness a cultural politics of martyrdom to strengthen their populist identity in the state. These mobilisations have had many material implications, including the transformation of many regions into exclusive party strongholds popularly known as *party villages*, especially in north Kerala. It is within this broader political, cultural, and historical context, our inquiries into how political murders in Kerala are embedded within a highly visualised culture of martyrdom, often materialising in the cultural and political hegemony of Left political ideologies is situated. In order to understand the currency of this visual politics to signify eternal political and cultural agency to the victims of political violence and the cultural and social meanings as political martyrdoms, let us examine the embodied social practices in their ritualistic consecration.

### **The corpothetics and the embodied martyrs**

Dead bodies in political murders turn out to be sites of mass-mediated cultural process that consolidates significant political power and symbolic capital. In the cases of Abhimanyu and Chandrasekharan, this power emanates from their ritualistic consecration as martyrs. DeSoucey et al. (2008) explore how embodied martyrdom, a contested social process involved in the formation of a martyr, relies heavily on the cultural contexts in which the martyr's image is constructed and the cultural capital of the martyr's supporters. They delineate how a martyr is often used as a resource by interest groups, which are termed as reputational entrepreneurs who leverage it to demonstrate the legitimacy and righteousness of their cause<sup>90</sup>.

Quite similar to this, the victims of political murders paradoxically gain profound discursive legitimacy as martyrs within Kerala's political imaginary. Within the historical continuum of partisan violence in the state, their deaths are quickly codified through a symbolic economy of martyrdom. They are assigned posthumous identities as martyrs of specific political groups. Their deaths are soon mediated as sites of mass grief and turned into grand mobilisers of public affect through narratives of martyrdom. The act of collective mourning, embodied in both the corporeal presence of their dead bodies and enduring narratives of sacrifice enshrined in the visual cultural artefacts that preserve their legacy, is a key discursive site of their ritualistic consecration as martyrs.

Their elevation into political icons as martyr cults has been achieved via the corpothetic engagements with their dead bodies and subsequent mediations of their symbolic legacy via representational texts. Pinney's concept of corpothetics (2003:19) refers to the sensory embrace of and the bodily engagement with images as characteristic of the modern devotional aesthetics in India. Similar

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<sup>90</sup> To cite empirical instances, during the Khalistan movement in the 1980s, the contentious martyrdom of figures such as Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale amplified the demand for an independent Sikh state. It was crucial to the mobilisation and radicalisation of the Sikh community's resistance against the Indian state by highlighting the questions of religious identity, political resistance, and national sovereignty (Jurgensmeyer, 2008). However, in the wake of the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1960s in South India, political martyrdom, which manifested predominantly via the acts of self-immolation of the Tamil people, was symbolic resistance against the central government's attempts to impose Hindi as the national language (Hardgrave, 1965). These acts became embodied sites of conflicts surrounding a hegemonic supra-national identity and its broader implications for regional language and cultural politics, reinforcing the right to linguistic and cultural autonomy and self-determination.

sensorial mechanisms are employed in mediating the deaths of Abhimanyu and Chandrashekhara as political martyrdoms and eliciting devotional zeal around their martyr imagery. The sensory regimes, visual, sonic and tactile are deployed to generate the party's affective power, manifested through the mass-mediated spectacles of public affect in mourning their deaths and enshrining their cultural memories.

The extensive and sensationalised coverage of Abhimanyu's murder by Malayalam television channels functioned as the primary mechanism for inscribing martyrdom onto his death. Through repetitive breaking news cycles, live footage from the crime scene, and continuous broadcasts of his funeral proceedings, the emotional outpouring of his family, friends, party workers, and the general public, the channels transformed mourning his death into a spectacular affective site, structured around narratives of sacrifice. Its raw visual grammar, characterised by unstable handheld shots framing his lifeless body, intimate close-ups for mourners faces, and the compositions of red flags enveloping his coffin, accompanied by the rhythmic chants of party slogans, in effect, helped the party to archive the affective energies generated around his death and to convert it as relics for further political negotiations.

However, the lingering focus on the emotional outpouring of his mother lying over his lifeless body remained key to mobilising diverse sensory responses to the martyr discourses constructed around his death. The prolonged camera focus on her loud lament, *njan petta makane, en kiliye* ("The son I gave birth to, my little bird"), the emotional core of the mass grief and its televisual mediation emerged as a powerful imagery capable of generating potential affective solidarities. Its affective force endures well beyond the moment of the broadcast or their brief circulation on social media and embeds it in public memory through various representational forms, such as street graffiti, murals, and posters commemorating his martyrdom (see Figure 17).



**Figure 17:** Abhimanyu's mother in front of a mural at Maharaja's college.  
Source: varunvasunarayananblog. Dated July 1, 2021.

The corpothetic engagement is also enabled by the animated rhythm of chanting communist slogans and ceremonial gestures imbued with ideological meanings. They manifest a visual spectacle of martyrdom, with his corpse draped in the Communist Party flag and surrounded by impassioned cries, "*Rakthasakshi marikkunnilla!*" (Martyrs never die!), "*Inquilab Zindabad!*" (Long live the revolution!), and the visceral lament "*Kanne karale Abhimanyu...*" (Beloved Abhimanyu lives through us). Whereas, the discourses of mourning over the mutilated body of Chandrashekharan and the reputational claims over his martyrdom are mobilised by a distinct public: the activists and sympathisers of the Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP), the splinter communist faction he founded, the opposition leaders, and the general public. Yet, the overwhelming outpouring of grief, manifested as public outrage and disillusionment, collective anguish shaped by narratives of intense bodily agony and sacrifice, and the subsequent elevation of him as a martyr figure unfolded in a characteristically communist style. Upon retrieving Chandrashekharan's corpse from the hospital, RMP cadres and loyalists swiftly draped him in their party flag, as a symbolic act of sanctifying his martyrdom. It was followed by the fervent chants of the party leaders that performatively enshrine his sacrifice within the party's revolutionary legacy. His body was then mounted on an open truck, adorned with red garlands and flanked by a towering portrait of

Chandrashekharan, transforming his remains into a mobile spectacle of communist martyrdom. As the procession advanced toward Onchiyam, his birthplace, throngs of mourners gathered along the route, drawn into the collective grief and political theatre his death had unleashed.

Chaandrashekharan's funeral is thus turned into a political spectacle, transforming the rituals of mourning into a claim of his martyrdom. Amidst the heightened melodrama, party loyalists dominated the space with passionate slogans: *Inquilab Zindabad*, *Dheeranaya Communiste* (The fearless Communist), *Sakhav T.P.kk abivadyanghal...Aayiramaayiram abivadhyanghal* (Thousands of revolutionary salutations to Comrade T.P.), each chant reinforcing the party's narrative of his death as a revolutionary event. When his body was brought to his residence, RMP members, clad in party uniforms, shouldered his coffin with ritual solemnity, further codifying his martyrdom within the party's iconography. The harrowing sight of his disfigured face unleashed waves of mass grief that the party harnessed to mobilise the affective energies for its ideological consolidation in the region.

The ritualistic appropriation of both of their dead bodies by respective parties from familial grief thus recasts them as political symbols of revolutionary sacrifice, asserting the parties' authority over the ideological meanings of their deaths. In addition, the prolonged media spectacle surrounding their deaths, particularly the months of sensationalised coverage and the annual media events on the commemorations of their death anniversaries embed an institutionalised version of their martyrdom in the collective memory. Television networks amplify the melodrama of such communal grief, which the party strategically mobilises as political capital, legitimised by its history of bodily sacrifice for ideological causes. Even years later, channels continue broadcasting anniversary specials ("Two Years Without Abhimanyu," etc.), recycling footage of their funerals into documentary-style narratives and reinforcing institutional legitimacy to the narratives of their martyrdom. These mediated visual practices of commemoration convert the deaths of grassroot political party workers into enduring political iconography, sustaining the

martyrs as perpetual media presence while their personal tragedies are endlessly repurposed as political theatre.

The revolutionary pathos around their dead bodies is built by these cultural mediations, transforming them into affective and sensorial agents of mass mobilisation. The corpothetic labour enacted through flag-draped bodies, ritualistic chants invoking the martyr's symbolic immortality, and acts of tactile veneration subsequently function to channel the affective energies into ideological capital and political consolidation. By permeating everyday life with martyr imagery, slogans and rituals of calendrical remembrance, the party inscribes itself into the state's political sensorium, making revolutionary sacrifice an inescapable dimension of public affect and collective memory

### **Martyrs as memory objects**

More than the material meanings of dying or suffering for a collective cause, martyrdom is a posthumous identity conferred by societies, institutions, and individuals engaged in commemorating the deceased. The extensive efforts of the respective communist parties to endure the martyr identities of Chandrashekharan and Abhimanyu thus hinge on the visual economy of cultural memory: memorial statues/columns, murals, posters, cinematic iconography, graffiti, etc. that crystallise martyrdom into durable legacies. This section looks at how their martyr status derives from the iterative labour of the cultural processes of memorialization; mnemonic infrastructures and territorial inscriptions of martyrdom by which the party archives and reanimates the emotional residues of their martyrdom, deploying visual relics to perpetuate political meaning long after the body's dissolution.

Years after the death of Chandrashekharan, a large memorial named *T.P. Martyrdom Square* was erected by the RMP in Orkkattery of Vatakara town at the exact location where his mutilated body was discovered in a pool of blood (see Figure 18). The two-story building serves as a monumental backdrop for a statuelike effigy of Chandrashekharan, frozen in his iconic posture, clad in a shirt and *dhoti* (a lower garment) resembling his public persona, as a spectacle occupying the town's visual landscape. Atop the building, Communist iconography of the hammer and sickle crowns the structure and a public clock tick against the timelessness of T. P's

legacy, juxtaposing the fleeting nature of time with the permanence of his memory. Together, the large structure of the building, the illuminated symbols of communist politics, and the defiant statue compose an enduring visual manifesto, spectacularizing Chandrashekhara's martyrdom as a perpetual rallying point in Kerala's contentious political landscape<sup>91</sup>.

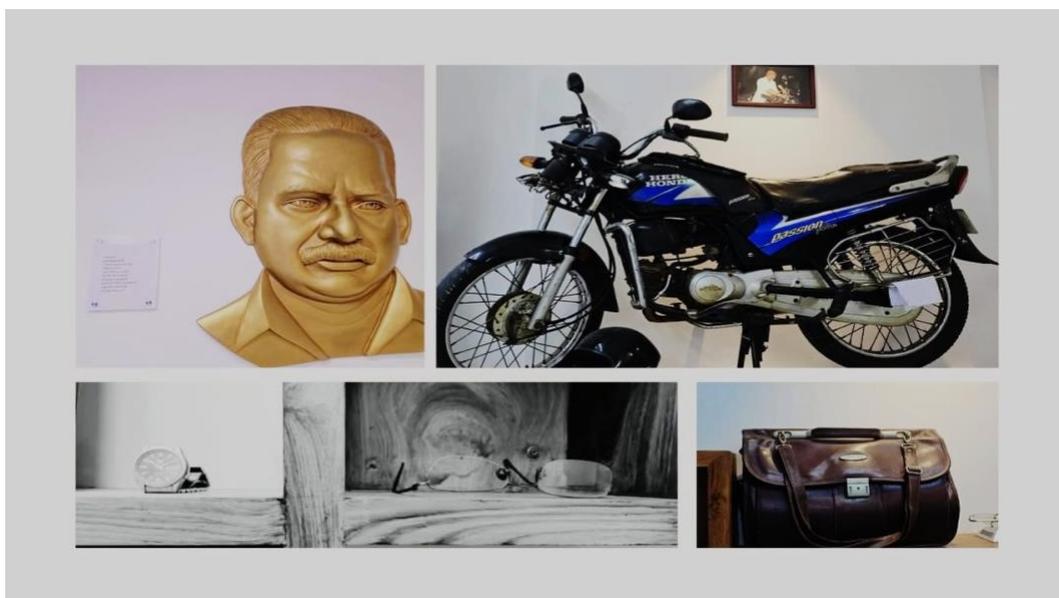


**Figure 18:** T.P martyr memorial built by R.M.P at Orkatteri. The inscription beneath his statue is a Malayalam poem by Veerankutti, celebrating the enduring legacy of his political ideals.

The Memorial square features a carefully curated collection of his personal belongings—his motorbike, bag, spectacles, and wristwatch—preserved exactly as they were at the time of his murder (see Figure 19). In adopting the conventions of museum culture, where objects linked to historical figures are elevated to the status of relics, these ordinary objects are conserved and displayed by imbuing them with political reverence. This practice situates Chandrashekhara within an

<sup>91</sup> Apart from this, a huge party office for RMP is built in Vadakara town in the name *Sakhavu* (comrade) *T.P Chandrasekharan Bhavan*.

institutionalised framework of remembrance, where material culture ritualises his legacy and connects it to a larger tradition of heroic materiality found in national memorials. The exhibition of his personal items also fosters a tactile visuality, an embodied, sensory mode of engagement in which the immediacy of these objects makes the memory of the martyr tactile. The visual proximity to these objects transforms sight into an affective experience in which the residues of his personal life evoke a visceral sense of solidarity. It also draws the audience into an intensely personal engagement with his legacy of martyrdom, bordering between the sacred and the profane.



**Figure 19:** A portrait of Chandrashekharan is displayed alongside the motorbike, bag, spectacles, and wristwatch that he had used at the time of his murder, all carefully preserved and exhibited within the T.P Memorial Square in Vatakara town.

On the first anniversary of Abhimanyu's death, the SFI installed a large memorial statue of him inside Maharajas College, alongside a poster at the entrance declaring, *"Welcome to Abhimanyu's Campus"*. It is also followed by the commemoration of his martyrdom day on 2 July every year.<sup>92</sup> These monumental

<sup>92</sup> The memorialisation of Abhimanyu's murder parallels that of Chandra Shekhar Prasad, former JNUSU president and CPI(ML) activist, who was shot dead in 1997 while protesting a Dalit massacre in Siwan, Bihar. His assassination ignited widespread student protests from Delhi to Siwan, met with police crackdowns. AISA argues that his killing was a response to rising resistance against feudal forces in Bihar. His martyrdom is thus viewed as a ramification of the political gang wars across upper caste and lower caste militias, wherein political killings and martyrdoms are common occurrences. Chandu's case stands out as exceptional because AISA managed to draw significant attention to it, a feat that would have been unimaginable had he not been associated with JNU.

practices ensure that their martyr legacies endure in the everyday memoryscapes of the public by anchoring them firmly in local history through tangible, lasting tributes. It subsequently grants the party the symbolic capital to strengthen its revolutionary identity, cultivate a network of affective political communities and foster loyalty among party workers. Also, a two-storeyed memorial costing nearly Rs 2.75 crore was built by the CPI(M) in Kaloor, Ernakulam, to honour Abhimanyu, with facilities to train and accommodate around thirty students, mainly from tribal and scheduled caste communities.<sup>93</sup> In addition, the party built a house for Abhimanyu's family on a land purchased in his native place, Idukki, and later organised his sister's wedding, covering all expenses and with the attendance of several party leaders. These acts of memory operate as affective infrastructures of political mobilisation, wherein material acts of care transform private grief into collective solidarity while materially anchoring the party's revolutionary ethos in everyday welfare practices. The ideological labour inherent in these performative acts of care, in effect, enables the party to accumulate symbolic capital, which legitimises its authority among marginalised communities and the ideological hegemony of the party at large.

Memorial statues are intricately linked to Left politics in Kerala, functioning as symbolic and material representations of the state's revolutionary history, socialist ideals, and political identity. The monumental structures resurrected for political martyrs thus act as enduring legacies of resistance, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to ideology. The martyr memorials are strategically placed in prominent public spaces, such as town squares, parks, and near significant political institutions. This ensures that martyr legacies and their ideological underpinnings remain cemented in the public sphere, marking them as the territorial markers of the party's dominance in the region. The widespread practice of dedicating public infrastructure to fallen political activists, as in the case of the bus shelter in Chandrashekharan's hometown, Onchiyam, named *Dheera Rakthasaakshi Sakhav T.P Chandrashekharante Paavana Smaranakk* (In Sacred Memory of the Valiant Martyr

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<sup>93</sup> The memorial, inaugurated by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan in the presence of Abhimanyu's parents, features a library, classrooms, and residential spaces, funded through the Rs 3.25 crore raised under the Abhimanyu Martyr Fund.

Comrade T.P Chandrasekharan), emanates from the territorial inscription of martyrdom across the state. Parallels of this can be observed in the naming of public libraries in Abhimanyu’s native place in his honour, as well as in the memorial park at Payyambalam beach in Kannur, which houses the tombs of several prominent Communist Party leaders (See Figure 20).



**Figure 20:** The Payyambalam beach in Kannur houses the tombs of several prominent Communist Party leaders, including Comrade E.K. Nayanar, C. Kannan, and Azheekkodan Raghavan. This public space, developed as a memorial park, also features the tombs of notable political leaders from other parties, as well as culturally significant figures who played key roles in the public life of the Kannur district.

Also, the town centre of Vatakara features a striking poster along with Che Guevara, captioned *Smaranayil Ennum Chentharakaanghal; Marana Bhayamillathe Thala Uyarthi Ninnavar* (Eternal Red Stars; Those Who Stood Fearless Before Death) (See Figure 21). These visual displays, often accompanied by portraits of communist luminaries from Marx to Stalin, demonstrate the veneration of both local martyrs along with global revolutionary icons in Kerala's political culture, sustaining the symbolic power of martyrs across temporal and spatial boundaries. Abhimanyu’s image is frequently displayed beside Che Guevara’s on posters and murals adorning public walls throughout the state, symbolising them as legendary martyrs in communist history. These infrastructures of political remembrance harness public grief and collective memorialization to transform the martyrs’ sacrifice into enduring political spectacles and territorial symbols of ideological dominance. Menon (2018) argues that the historical continuities of these memorial statues or monuments for

victims of political murders can be traced back to medieval traditions that honoured fallen heroes in battle and those who were executed for transgressions. He delineates how communist parties have expanded upon this tradition by establishing a territorial inscription of martyrdom, marked by the construction of *rakthasaakshi mandapams* (martyr memorials) dedicated to those who perished in political struggles:

“An important junction in almost every village in northern Kerala is a red conical structure inscribed with the names of martyrs and the flag of the communist party flying. These martyr memorials occupy public spaces alongside churches, shrines, statues of local politicians and religious figures and the ubiquitous tea shops. They mark a condensation of the history of violence, revolution and martyrdom in the countryside” (Menon 2018).



**Figure 21:** A poster in the Onchiyam town where a portrait of Chandrashekharan is placed alongside that of Che Guevara.

The martyrdoms of Chandrasekharan and Abhimanyu have been subjected to extensive cinematic iconography. *Naan Petta Makan* (Palamel, 2019) is a political biopic of Abhimanyu, which features his ideological formation as a student activist and a popular political leader, and his subsequent status as a political martyr following his murder. The film opens with a powerful scene that juxtaposes Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination with Abhimanyu’s death, showing him painting revolutionary graffiti on Maharajas College’s wall before being fatally stabbed. It is accompanied by slow-motion shots of a Che Guevara-adorned red flag and the mournful chant “Ormakal Venam” (We shall not forget), intensifying the emotional impact of his murder (Figure 22 ). The narrative subsequently employs a flashback to trace his origins as the child of a Tamil speaking peasants from a tribal community to a rural

village in Munnar of Idukki, which in the film is symbolically nicknamed after Abhimanyu. His affective and ethical engagements with plantation labourers in this setting are presented as foundational to his emergence as a student political leader who is deeply attentive to the concerns of the poor and marginalised. Featuring him as a compassionate and morally upright youth, marked by an idealised innocence and active involvement in left-oriented student politics at Maharaja's College and through the parallel subplot involving his close association with Nelson Christo (a figure evocative of the communist leader Simon Britto who is known as living communist martyr<sup>94</sup>) and the circumstances surrounding his death, the film constructs a reverential account of Abhimanyu's ideological formation. This narrative progression, shaped by conflict and sacrifice, thus contributes to a hagiographic narrative of his ideological formation. In its final sequence, a funeral tableau is orchestrated, juxtaposing his mother's lamenting with a public procession as his lifeless body is transported back home by his family, friends and party workers, amid the display of communist flags, ritualised slogans, and the formal inscriptions of martyrdom. A similar narrative unfolds in *Padmavyuhathil Abhimanyu* (Aradhya, 2019), a cinematic reimaging of his life and murder, with a title that evokes the

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<sup>94</sup> Simon Britto, a CPIM leader, was left paralysed after being stabbed by members of the Kerala Students Union (KSU), the student wing of the Indian National Congress, at Maharajas College in 1983, while he was a leader of the Students Federation of India (SFI). He shared a deep bond with Abhimanyu, which he described as akin to that of a father and son, as he spoke in front of Abhimanyu's dead body at Maharajas College.

mythological character Abhimanyu from the Mahabharata (Figure 23&24).



**Figure 22:** *Naan Petta Makan* begins with a flashback to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu extremist named Nathuram Vinayak Godse, drawing parallels with the murder of Abhimanyu by communal forces. It then proceeds to a close-up shot of Abhimanyu's graffiti on the walls of Maharajas, where he gets stabbed by a group of young men. As he falls, a red flag bearing the image of Che Guevara is shown, slowly moving across the screen, accompanied by a heightened background score that evokes a lingering sense of mourning. Following this sequence, the film's title is revealed, with a communist party flag positioned along the title, accompanied by a musical score chanting *Ormakal Venam, Ormakal Venam* (we shall not forget ...we shall not forget).



**Figure 23:** A still from *Padmayoothil Abhimanyu*, a biopic on Abhimanyu's death, where his younger brother conducts the funerary rituals while also holding a Communist flag. This scene evokes a melodramatic pull towards allegiance to the party among his family members, friends and villagers, the spectators within the film's narrative space.



**Figure 24:** Abhimanyu's mother's loud lament during his funeral. The actual image of his mother, Bhoopathi, crying loudly "*njan petta makane, en kiliye*" ("The son I gave birth to, my little bird"), has been mediated into various visual texts to evoke the visceral appeal around his death and embed it in popular memories.

*T.P. 51* (Thazhath, 2015) is a low-budget political biopic about Chandrashekhara's life and the political events leading to his brutal murder<sup>95</sup>. The title of the film is signified by the titular 51 stab wounds which killed him. Resembling an amateur film, the movie opens with a documentary-style prologue that frames his birth in Onchiyam in the district of Kozhikode as a pivotal political

<sup>95</sup> The film had to undergo an unofficial ban from private theatre owners, allegedly due to opposition from the CPIM, resulting in limited release in theatres and struggles with censorship approval. Despite this, it received positive reception in Vadakara, a stronghold of the CPIM, where the slain leader rebelled against the party, and founded Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP). The director of the film Moidu Thazhath, was involved in directing documentaries for party candidates during election campaigns and producing musical programs on the party-affiliated channel, Kairali TV.

event<sup>96</sup>. The film constructs a linear political narrative that charts T. P.'s progression from his early activism within the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) to his emergence as a prominent mass leader in the region, foregrounding the ideological and organisational tensions that precipitate his eventual break with the Communist Party of India (Marxist). This rupture is narratively positioned as a formative moment, leading to the establishment of the Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP). The film also situates his personal life, most notably his marriage to fellow comrade K. K. Rema and moments from his everyday domesticity, within this political arc, projecting the entanglement of his personal and political life with the broader consolidations of the RMP.

Melodrama operates as a key narrative force in these films that turns the political history emotionally intelligible to the audience. As a result, political conflict is articulated predominantly through a narrative arc of the emotional intensities with the disintegration of the family following the murder of a family member. The public personas of both Abhimanyu and Chandrasekharan are not represented as constituted exclusively by communist ideology or political activism. Instead, their identities are projected to have extensively shaped through their everyday social and ethical interactions within their socio-political and geographical contexts. Vattavada, a high-altitude village near Munnar in Idukki, known for its plantation economy, serves as a crucial backdrop through which Abhimanyu's transformation into a socially committed and benevolent youth is shaped. In *Njan Petta Makan*. Similarly, during his college years, he is portrayed as a student leader marked by exceptional compassion and social responsibility, a characterization that renders him a populist figure both in his native village and within the college where he was killed. These films, by adopting the melodramatic conventions, such as extensive reliance on the

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<sup>96</sup> Beginning with a documentary-style introduction featuring a voiceover establishing the narrative in Onchiyam, Chandrashekhara's birth in the film is claimed as a momentous occasion with the potential to redefine Kerala's political history. His progression from an adolescent to a passionate communist worker is portrayed through frequent references to the Onchiyam martyrs, eight Communist Party members who were shot dead by colonial British police in 1948. The film progresses, depicting how TP's staunch communist ideals are shaped by the martyr narratives that forge the region's collective identity through constant references to his reverence for the narratives of sacrifice and resilience embodied by the Onchiyam martyrs. These narratives permeate the everyday conversations of the local people as manifested in the ordinary conversations in local tea shops, TP's admiration for the memorial statue of the Onchiyam martyr, Mandodi Kannan, the public announcements inviting locals to the public event commemorating their martyrdom anniversary, constant invocations of peasant insurrections and so on.

suffering of the protagonist, moral binaries and familial grief, frames political violence as a rupture within the familial domain or their immediate social and cultural setting. It not only gives meaning to the sacrifice of Abhimanyu and Chandrasekharan or the politics they embodied but also establishes their martyrdom and sacrifice as melodramatic events that demand empathy and reverence not just from a political community but also from the broader collective of a mass audience.

This string of political films differs significantly from high-budget biopics, showcasing the legacies of towering political figures whose popularity extends beyond regional boundaries. Instead, these films build political myths around regional figures like Chandrashekharan and Abhimanyu, whose influence is rooted in local political animosities and whose political career rests in the regional landscape. Produced with limited budgets and largely unfamiliar casts, these films speak to a specific audience deeply embedded in regional political contexts, and their resonance depends heavily on viewers' prior knowledge of the murders and public discourse around political violence. The spectacles of persecution, sacrifice and steadfastness in the face of suffering in these films contribute to the symbolic resources of their martyr status. They serve to immortalise their personas as martyrs in collective memory, portraying their suffering and death as validation of their ideological or political convictions, eliciting devotional zeal and fostering affiliation with the cause of their martyrdom. By dramatising persecution and ideological resilience, these films unfold as melodramas, where the revolutionary ideals of their political activism become entangled with the emotional reactions to their deaths. These portrayals are crucial to sustaining a popular visual narrative about their martyrdoms, strengthening their symbolic role in the political discourses of Kerala.

In addition, the multitude of graffiti of Chandrashekharan's and Abhimanyu underscores the powerful visual presence of martyr discourses in street art and the state's public culture. The bus stops, boundary walls, etc., feature graffiti on their martyrdom, and at Maharaja's College, an entire wall is dedicated to Abhimanyu, with his final words, "Let communalism perish", preserved as a lasting tribute. These

images are frequently used in protests and circulated across social media in various forms, posters, caricatures, and animations, embedding Chandrashekhara and Abhimanyu in ritualised public memory, reanimated more powerfully on their martyrdom days. Often, these graffiti appear alongside the image of Che Guevara, drawing visual and ideological parallels. Like Che, whose martyrdom made him a global revolutionary icon, Chandrashekhara and Abhimanyu are visually elevated within Kerala's Leftist discourse as symbols of sacrifice and resistance. These memory objects, commemorative practices, and martyr imaginaries, predicted in their visual cultural politics, hold a key role in marking the party as an affective force in the cultural milieu of the state. The visual cultural mediation of the hagiographies of Chandrashekhara and Abhimanyu as affective-sensorial nodes must therefore be understood as the corporeal anchors of the Left populism.

### **The visual culture of martyrdom vis-à-vis Left populism**

The enduring success of Left politics and its status as an electoral and cultural hegemon in the state of Kerala is heavily rooted in populism. While it may be intuitively argued that this popular moment emanates from ideological positions of the Left such as social justice and equitable distribution of resources that find resonance with the aspirations of peasants and marginalised communities; it must be noted that this populist consolidation also stems from the Left's aptitude in creating a national popular will through engagements with both illiterate masses as well as the literate middle-class. Visual media have been a key cultural apparatus in this regard. Consider that theatre, popular cinema, etc. have not only functioned as mass media to disseminate communist ideology through a visual culture of social realism (Joseph 2012) but have also been used to create a unified Malayali identity around a common language (Mannathukaran 2021). Visual media, especially popular cinema, have also served as a key ideological apparatus for the state's discourse of developmental politics and its progressive secular credentials (Edachira 2022).

Additionally, visual media helps generate symbolic affects through recurrent motifs of raised fists, flags, hammer and sickle, etc., marking the party's populist inclination through the corporeal symbolism of revolution and class solidarity.

Analysing communist iconography in Kerala, such as portraits of yesteryear leaders displayed in communist family homes and circulated via social media, Anil (2025) delineates how they act as embodied sites where the affective energies of party politics are generated and realised. She argues that these practices render Communism as an embodied presence in Kerala; an idea that finds its resonance in the Malayalam phrase commonly used by party workers and leaders, whereby they describe the Party as a “vikaram” (an emotion, something that is felt). The martyr iconography and its cultural politics have played a similar role for the communist ideology, and have had not only symbolic but material implications with regard to public culture as well.

It has been previously argued that martyrdom persists through memory objects, commemorative practices and martyr imaginaries functioning as embodied sites in visual culture. It is nevertheless important to analyse its material footprint in the context of certain regions with a deep-rooted history of revolutionary martyrdom being transformed into enduring strongholds of communist politics (Madathil 2008; Kaul N. & Kannangara N. 2021). Onchiyam, a village in Kozhikode where ten Communist activists were killed in a police firing in 1948 (marking Kerala’s first party martyrs), has remained a Communist stronghold, often termed a *party village*. Onchiyam had witnessed a bloody confrontation when locals resisted against the attempts of the Colonial British police to search households to arrest leaders of the banned CPI(M). Etched popular memory via revolutionary folklore across North Malabar, the event fertilised martyr narratives that consequently preserved Onchiyam as a bastion for the party. Figures 25 and 26 are displays at the T.P memorial in Orkkattery, which illustrate how the revolutionary moment of the Onchiyam massacre has thrived in public culture. Similarly, revolutionary sacrifice has been a key agent of communist ideological consolidation in other villages in Kozhikode, such as Kayyur, Munayamkunnu, and Koothuparamba, shaped by legacies of anti-feudal struggles and political martyrdom (Madathil 2008) and the villages of Punnapra and Vayalar in Alappuzha with a history of Communist militant uprisings against the princely state of Travancore in British India in 1946. At the same time, the translation of affective energies into ideological consolidation must

also be understood within the broader context of electoral democracy. The political processes, after all, are set in motion by the threat of retaliatory violence. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research in Kannur—a region marked by a long and violent history of political killings—Chaturvedi (2023) argues that the cyclical nature of retaliatory violence between the CPI(M) and BJP workers in Kerala stands as a tragic testimony to their success in socio-political consolidation of the communities. They find common cause not only in vengeance but also in grief and loss emanating from the camaraderie between families of the victims and their colleagues and friends. The fostering of fraternal ties orients individuals to respective political affiliations. This is further reinforced by the analysis of Kaul and Nisar Kannangara (2013) on how communist party villages manifest these tightly-knit community bonds as political allegiances, social relations, visual landscapes and the everyday rhythms of life deeply intertwined with the communist party. The communist organisation can especially be observed in regions with histories of intense political violence, where the narrative of martyrdom easily fertilises mass mobilisation.



**Figure 25:** The text loosely translates as: *The Declaration of Independence by the people of Onchiyam against the treacherous chieftains who pawned the red flag, soaked in the blood of martyrs, to class traitors.*



**Figure 26:** The text loosely translates as: Onchiyam points to history. The martyrs and their rightful heirs stood steadfastly with RMP, with the courage of a fighting spirit and the thunder of Inquilab (revolution).

Even as martyrdom narratives have shaped the political trajectories of both the BJP and the CPI(M) in Kerala, the respective political outcomes have differed substantially. Since the 1960s, the RSS (and later the BJP) have used martyr legacies to reinforce Hindu nationalist ideology, attempting to cultivate militant solidarity through discourses of vengeance. BJP’s tactics of populist mobilisation around political martyrs have largely relied on memorial events, social media campaigns, and narratives of victimhood, all aimed at furthering broader Hindutva consolidation. Regardless, their efforts have failed to match CPI(M)’s electoral success, whose engagements with martyrdom are not only rooted in the anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggles but have successfully been leveraged through visual populism built around symbols of class struggle. Additionally, the legitimacy of martyr politics derives significantly from endowing them with “personalistic and paternalistic attributes that are characteristic of populist leaderships” (Moffitt 2016). One can accordingly witness in Kerala’s left populism not only in the veneration of martyred figures—

alongside key Communist leaders—but also in the language of kinship, which transforms political organisation into a quasi-filial consolidation.

### **Conclusion**

The symbolic and cultural capital accrued to political martyrdom is consolidated through a mass-mediated cultural process, predicated upon the visual components of cultural politics that enable enduring collective memories. This visual economy of memory, territorially inscribed through the legacy of martyrs, is exemplified in the reanimations of Chandrashekharan and Abhimanyu as key figures in regional political discourses playing significant roles in the ideological consolidation of their respective communist parties. The political agency produced by their martyr cults derives largely from an affective cultural economy, one shaped by embodied (corporeal) experiences and a tactile visibility sustained by commemorative infrastructures. It does so by cultivating filial and emotional connections to the public personas of the martyrs, amplified by the mass spectacles of mourning and mnemonic visual objects that generate public fervour mobilised by the Left into its populist political streak. The affective forces circulating within these performative spectacles of martyrdom assist in inscribing communist ideology into Kerala's everyday socio-political and cultural milieu by embedding their presence both ideologically and materially. Through a curated sensory and corporeal visual politics, this symbolic economy of martyrdom significantly contributes to the Left's populism, which is manifest across regional strongholds as quasi-filial party solidarity.

## **Conclusion**

I shall conclude by integrating the key findings of my research. This thesis has brought the melodramatic excess of mass grief into conversation with the cultural significance of melodrama vis-à-vis its tensions with the discourses of the state's public rationality. The core arguments of the thesis need to be addressed in relation to broader questions of political power, sovereignty, mass attendance, public rationality etc., locating their negotiations within the comparative crucible of cultural politics in South India. Towards the end, I shall also address the limitations of this study while explaining why they lie beyond the thesis's current focus.

In this thesis, the public affect in mass grieving has been engaged by demonstrating the diverse terrains melodrama inhabits in the public cultures of Kerala against a long trajectory of ideological privileging of realism. It has been done by examining the visual cultures of mass grief with an extensive focus on the monumental public affect displayed at three mourning sites – cinema, celebrity funerals and political violence. The chapter on the celebrity funerals has explored the colossal mourning publics at the funerals of public figures in Kerala, both in terms of their in-person attendance and participation through TV and live-streaming platforms. While the corporeal attendance of a monumental public and their emotional outpouring transform celebrity funerals into a distinct cultural memory, their televised mediation, through live broadcasts and digital streaming, cultivates an affective economy of grief. The monumental public affect displayed thus thrives as a media memory, consolidated upon the live television coverage and its circulation through live streaming platforms, enabling the ceremonial participation of an even larger audience in physical absence. I have demonstrated how the cultural dynamics of a rampant affective media economy built upon the sheer scale of the public's emotional outpouring contradict Kerala's rational self-image, which champions the idea of a "reasonable public". In other words, the material footprint of this cultural-political practice, as manifested in its corporeal and mediated intensities, discloses the populist sentiments in the mass culture of Kerala. It subsequently unveils an "irrational" underside of the projection of its public culture as devoid of melodramatic cultural intensities.

In the following chapter, I have examined how contemporary Malayalam cinema's remarkable preoccupation with community formations in mourning draws heavily on melodrama as a key political and aesthetic force. In both *Ee. Ma. Yau.* and *Jana Gana Mana*, as representatives of this new narrative milieu, mourning is a performative spectacle that brings a public reckoning of the visceral intensities of the grieving subjects with institutional power. Mass grief unfolds in the form of a melodramatic community formation around the dead bodies and is transformed into the unruly expressions of grief, anger, and defiance of the mourners, converging into powerful negotiations for justice. These conflicts are rooted in the cultural and political dimensions of the identities of the deceased or the mourning publics. In *Ee. Ma. Yau.*, the denial of burial ground for a Dalit Christian occasion a community formation, rendering mourning an insurgent critique of systemic injustice perpetuated by the state, religion and civil society. Whereas in *Jana Gana Mana*, the brutal rape and death of a young Muslim woman transform mourning into an active site of protest and widespread affective solidarities against the institutional structures of the state, media, police, court, etc. In both these films, the emotional outpouring of the mourners is marked by the spatial transgression of the private and public spheres of mourning and forms subversive alliances that cut across family or kinship. The melodramatic spectacularism of collective mourning in these films serves as a discursive space for the bereaved's confrontation with institutional power, which disrupts Malayalam cinema's rejection of melodrama as an irrational remnant of realism. Instead, as I have demonstrated, the spatial and aesthetic transgressions of melodramatic mourning communities emerge as a political and cultural response to the violence in the public sphere, built upon the privileging of realism and an abstract locus of public rationality

In the chapter on political violence, I have examined a mass-mediated cultural practice through which the victims of political violence are venerated as martyrs in Kerala. This has consolidated a symbolic economy of martyrdom for the Left Political tradition in Kerala with vital imbrications of a melodramatic political culture. The hyper-visible visual cultural politics surrounding mourning/memorialising political martyrs, manifested in public mourning rituals,

commemorative artefacts, and performative welfare gestures, reveal the valences of political martyrdom as populist spectacles in the state with substantial political and cultural value. Through an extensive analysis of a range of visual cultural texts produced in response to the murders of two Communist Party workers, T.P. Chandrasekharan and Abhimanyu, I have delineated how political martyrdom is leveraged within a populist cultural framework for ideological reproduction, by mediating their hagiographies as affective sensorial conduits for political mobilisation. By enabling the performative Left populism, the visual iconography of their martyrdom fashions the Malayali subject's affective relationship with the Communist Party and acts as corporeal anchors to the filial allegiance to the party. However, a populist politics built upon the melodramatic discourses of mourning or commemoration of political martyrs, and the attendant symbolic and material footprints of its visual populism, marks a clear disjuncture to the claims of Kerala's rational politics, devoid of affective political mobilisations. The cultural dynamics of this ceremonial reverence as martyr cults, where the revolutionary moment of Leftist politics and visual populism are intertwined via the cultural processes of martyrdom, are thus proven to be antithetical to the progressive cultural identification of Kerala's rational public culture.

These mourning publics reveal the unique dynamics of their affective relationship with the public sphere which is mediated by melodrama. The distinct ways in which the affective valences of these melodramatic cultural forms have been co-opted and mediated into spectacles of political and cultural affect by the state, political establishments, media, and other actors reveals the implications of its performative intensities for the cultural politics of the state. The dynamics of these negotiations are variously manifested by a set of visual materials that are used in the meditations of public affect as televisual economies of mass grief, performative spectacles of affective solidarities and visual populism of martyr iconography.

Altogether, these mourning publics are marked by a distinct dynamic of melodramatic transgressions of the spatial and aesthetic boundaries of mourning, followed by their mediations as cultural or political expressions of mass affect. At the heart of these mourning publics is a *melodramatic excess* in emotional response

to death, often articulated in the form of a community affiliation that transcends the performative boundaries of realism and melodrama in mourning. It frequently disrupts the normative spatial configurations of the private and public mourning, rendering the public sphere as a contested terrain of melodramatic displays of grief and affective solidarities of a moral community formed around death.

I have previously established how the melodramatic spectacularism of the eruption of these mourning publics into the public sphere of Kerala becomes a site of subversion against the historical legitimacy of realism over melodrama in the public discourses of Kerala. My analysis of the conflict posed by the visceral intensities of these mourning publics is thus set against an enduring hierarchical contest against melodrama, with key underpinnings in the region's discursive formations of public rationality, often accredited to the hegemony of a text-mediated public sphere. Against this, I show that the affective excess of mass grief destabilises the ideological condescension toward melodrama, rooted in its reinforcement of realism's legitimacy as the aesthetic counterpart to the state's rational modernity. The irrational, unrestrained emotional outpouring in the public sphere therefore operates as a cultural counterweight to the hegemonic narratives of public reason and its underpinnings on the state's developmental politics.

In conjunction with what I have shown in earlier chapters, one could see that melodrama emerges not merely as a representational mode or an aesthetic constellation but as a form/mode of mourning that materialises in mass cultural expressions. The affective performance of melodrama in mourning either challenges or exceeds the realist aesthetics conventionally attributed to the public culture of Kerala. Nevertheless, it paradoxically assumes discursive legitimacy, although for a brief period, to wage contestations with key questions animating their collective mobilisation. Therefore, my thesis proves that melodramatic transgressions in public mourning are not to be engaged merely as a counterpoint to Malayali cultural essentialism of a rational modernity, but as a cultural force whose affective intensities offer critical insights into the cultural dynamics of mass participation in mourning in Kerala.

Subsequently, my research underscores the cultural significance of melodrama, foregrounding the diverse cultural and political terrains it inhabits, particularly as a mode of cultural expression/ address. This analytical framework, however, emerges from recognising that the very conceptualisation of mourning-as melodrama hinges fundamentally on the notion of excess, as a qualitative rupture in normative regimes of affective expression in the context of this study. This “excess” in the case of mourning publics I have analysed is marked by the transgressive surplus of their emotional outpouring, which compels the state and its democratic functionaries to either accommodate it or co-opt it. Yet, how do we make sense of the excess in emotional responses to death? What renders it a mode of melodramatic public culture? Beyond examining this conflict against the state’s framing of the public sphere as a domain of realist political discourse stripped of melodramatic populism, I argue that this tension is also deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of mourning practices and traditions of grief observance in South Asia.

Mourning the dead in public carries an unquestionable sanction across most of South Asia for performative expression of grief, where public displays of emotion are not merely allowed but socially mandated in the immediate aftermath of loss. The visible demonstration of grief or other emotional reactions is often viewed as part of reinforcing communal norms of affective solidarities and gestural alliances in the social and ritualistic practices of mourning. This is significantly different to the social aspects of mourning in Western society, which privatises and interiorises grieving (Cools 2021). The privatisation of grief and mourning rituals has to be understood also in relation to the broader capitalist interventions to individualise loss, as evident in the widespread prevalence of funeral industries in more individualistic societies in the West.<sup>97</sup> Whereas, mourning in South Asia is marked by highly expressive and public displays of grief, including loud wailing, ritualistic lamentations, collective funerary rituals, prolonged mourning period, etc. In India, grieving practices often take the form of communal events shaped by religious and caste-based traditions. The cultural expression of mourning tends to be intense and

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<sup>97</sup> The funeral industry encompasses businesses that provide services related to funerals, burials, cremations, and memorial services.

demonstrative, with a noticeable gendered divide.<sup>98</sup> Sarkar (2009), in his analysis of the cultural and political dimensions of mourning one of the most violent events in South Asia, the India-Pakistan partition, highlights how the language of trauma, its frameworks, and the practices of mourning loss in India differ significantly from those in other cultures.<sup>99</sup> The cultural performance of mourning rituals and customs is also guided by locally specific cultural roles, taboos, etc., which blend deep ritualism with communal solidarity.

The cultural legitimacy of these highly visible mourning performances relies on their spatial containment, divided between private and public spheres of grief. Their performative excess remains confined to domestic or familial spaces, where unrestrained emotional expressions of loss unfold without disrupting the civic order or its rational aesthetics. Unlike collective mobilisations around injustice, where grief can become a site of radical solidarity, these mourning rituals do not transcend their aesthetic and spatial boundaries. The communal affiliation formed around the deceased is not driven by an ethical confrontation with the violent spectacle of the corpse. Instead, mourning remains a ritualised yet contained practice, never exceeding its prescribed spatial and performative limits to inspire broader political action or emerge as a legitimate site to assemble to evoke potential solidarities of a transient moral community.

Whereas the affective publics that I have examined are marked by the transgressive cultural potential of their mass participation. Even as their confrontation/ negotiations with institutional structures of power gain visibility through their melodramatic spectacles, the heightened emotionality risks their emotional outpouring being reduced to sites of sentimental excess. The performative aspects of their transgressions spill into public view through heightened emotional displays—funeral processions, defiant solidarities, or the corporeal engagements

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<sup>98</sup> Women typically express their grief through loud, physical displays like wailing and weeping, while men's emotional responses to death tend to be more subdued and restrained, focusing more on funerary paraphernalia, reflecting traditional gender roles.

<sup>99</sup> Sarkar denotes that the most common form of mourning, related to death, is imbricated with concerns about public hygiene, spiritual well-being, and rehabilitation of the mourners. Local climate requires the quick disposal of the body; a period of ascetic restraint (dietary restrictions, sexual abstinence, meditation) is followed by rituals (religious offerings, charitable dispensations) aimed at the expiation of departed souls, and a feast marking the mourner's return to the normal flow of life.

with mourning and remembrance. These gestures subsequently evolve into a melodramatic mode due to their reliance on visceral appeals and symbolic gestures of mass affect (Anker 2014). The melodramatic excess displayed by these mourning publics, marked by heightened affective intensities, gets subsequently positioned as a destabilising force of the ideal of communicative rationality, the foundation of democratic engagement in the public sphere. This excess is further reduced as reflective of a public culture increasingly shaped by the melodramatic tendencies of populist aspirations. However, what is key to positing these emotional responses as excessive is the friction between socially accepted forms of mourning marked by restrained civic conduct and the raw, unrestrained emotions that lie outside the rational boundaries of the public sphere, often exceeding the spatial and aesthetic borderlines of public mourning.

Where does this cultural tendency to pathologise melodrama as a form of public culture arise? I argue that the devaluation of monumental display of public affect in mass grieving, as a symptom of a melodramatic public culture, stems from a wider cultural delegitimisation of melodrama as an aesthetic mode. This delegitimisation is historically rooted in the privileging of realism across various spatial and temporal contexts, serving as an ideological corollary of modernity. Our enquiries on melodrama as a public culture are therefore heavily shaped by the scholarship on melodrama as an aesthetic constellation, which is at least partly a reflection of the dearth of literature on melodrama as a mode of public culture. Any academic inquiry into melodrama as a mode of cultural or political expression, thus, cannot be undertaken without taking into account its stock association as an aesthetic form. Melodrama is thus often theorised as an aesthetic mode, commonly examined in relation to performative and narrative mediums such as theatre, film, and fiction, with its conventions deeply rooted in popular theatrical traditions (Brooks 1976; Gledhill 1987). The narrative focus of melodrama in domestic and familial relationships and moral conflicts, often accompanied by themes of romance or sacrifice and appeal to gendered notions of sentimentality and virtue, has resulted in classifying it as a "feminine genre" (Gledhill 1987; Williams 2001); this is especially

true in the Western context where melodrama has not become the fulcrum of formal aggregation, as in India.

In addition, its perceived reliance on hyperbolic emotionality, moral absolutism, and dramatic plot devices has been used to marginalise melodrama as a low aesthetic form. This devaluation has helped consolidate melodrama's identity as mass entertainment, relying on overt sentimentality and moral purity. It has been key to the dismissal of the genre as unsophisticated or manipulative. The stock pejorative of emotional excess, which attaches melodrama to women and mass audiences, excludes it from the dominant realist standards, reinforcing its marginalisation within elite hierarchies of high art. Altogether, melodrama has been employed as a term that indexes superficial, ersatz and inferior modes of cinematic entertainment that were characterised by a rhetoric of excess (Dissanayake 2003).

However, the significant academic attention melodrama has garnered over the past two decades, particularly from feminist and postmodern scholarship, has illuminated the diverse cultural terrains it occupies. Through a feminist reexamination, Gledhill (1987) engages melodrama as cultural history, particularly as a site for negotiating gendered subjectivity and cultural tensions. For her, melodrama is not centred exclusively on the emotional life of women or familial discourses, but is defined by a broader mobilisation of feeling, constituting the core of Hollywood cinema. Williams (2001) notes the democratic potential of melodrama, pointing out how it renders moral conflicts visible through heightened affective intensity, amplifying marginalised voices through spectacles of victimhood and injustice. She also examines the pervasive influence of melodrama across genres, including action and horror films. In addition, the subversive potential of melodrama is discussed in terms of its origin as a historical response to the confrontation between the aristocracy and the newly emerging bourgeoisie within a hierarchical social structure (Gurata 2021). Locating melodrama's origin in the social milieu of early capitalism, Brooks (1995; 1976) argues that melodrama emerged as the principal mode for uncovering and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era.

As Prasad (2001) has argued, melodrama as an aesthetic mode has undergone significant transcultural migration since its emergence in early capitalist Europe. Far from remaining bound to its bourgeois theatrical origins, melodramatic aesthetics have been radically reinvented across cultural contexts. Drawing from the insights on melodrama's varied global expressions, particularly the enduring melodramatic traditions in the cultural life of many parts of Asia (Dissanayake 2003), I have outlined the tensions in accommodating melodrama's cultural significance in the popular discourses on Kerala modernity. It is in this historical and cultural context that melodramatic amplification of performative gestures amongst mourning communities becomes a counterpoint to the rational Malayali self-positioning. In order to substantiate this argument, I have shown the crucial political valences of the affective intensities of public mourning. In the case of celebrity funerals, the monumental public attendance and their emotional outpouring embody the cultural manifestation of popular sovereignty. The monarchic monumentality of celebrity funerals reveals a form of popular sovereignty that publicly deviates from the electoral basis of sovereign power. It has been manifested through granting disproportionately grand funerals to minor cultural figures, wherein their funeral processions become ceremonial rituals through which their public legitimacy is cast as cultural icons of popular sovereignty. A media economy built around the affective valences of a monumental crowd further amplifies and summons these populist sentiments, aligning Kerala well within the star politics of South India.

The chapter on political violence delineates how a melodramatic political culture thrives through a political economy of martyrdom that legitimises political violence for ideological consolidations. Anker (2014) examines the political strategies, and affective pulls of melodramatic political discourses on contemporary American political life which is developed after 9/11 and how their mobilisations to retributive violence through signifiers of American innocence or a virtuous nation. She delineates how the conventions of melodrama helped to legitimise the expansion of U.S. global power and justify the growth of the national-security state. Similar to this, the discourses of victimhood, sacrifice and resistance around the communist

martyrs potentially consolidates the party's visual populist appeal, revealing the currency of melodramatic cultural expressions in political communication in Kerala.

These diverse terrains that melodrama inhabits within the state's public culture reveal that the melodramatic excess in the cultural sites of mourning is not simply a theatrical artifice but a vital force often operating beneath the surface of formal politics. It also acts as a critical mechanism for staging discourses that lack institutional legitimacy, particularly in contesting the state's dominant discourses of realism. Brooks (1984) delineates melodrama as modernity's compensatory mechanism for moral fragmentation, where the collapse of the traditional sacred institutions necessitates hyperbolic emotional expression to render invisible ethical struggles legible. <sup>100</sup> The performative mode through heightened gestures and theatrical excess, for Brooks, transcends genre, becoming a pervasive cultural logic that imbues collective action with moral urgency.

Similarly, melodrama operates as an agential force for the mourning publics in Kerala, enabling them to occupy the public sphere through performative intensities and mass-mediated visibility. Their melodramatic spectacularism subsequently evolves as a historical response to the privileging of realism as the dominant mode of public address. It operates as a shadow realm, making visible the affective and ethical undercurrents that hegemonic narratives withheld. It also unravels the enduring vitality of melodrama across the state's political spectacles, media ecologies, and protest cultures despite the historical disdain for melodramatic expressions as an irrational mode of public expression. Hence, similar to what Williams (2015) termed a structure of feeling, I establish that the melodramatic uprisings at mourning sites manifest a residual cultural logic that endures beneath Kerala's dominant realist paradigm. The public displays of emotional outpouring, ritualised processions, and iconographic displays of public affect in the mourning sites, in effect, function as shadow archives of the state's repressed sentimental excess, complicating the state's institutionalised tension between melodrama and realism. Digital and visual platforms amplify this conflict, magnifying emotional excess to convert private grief into public, moral and political theatre.

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<sup>100</sup> Through stark binaries, theatrical excess, and heightened gestures—what Brooks terms the "moral occult"—melodrama externalises latent moral conflicts, staging them as urgent, visible spectacles.

However, what is proposed is not a totalizing shift to melodramatic public culture, which totally undermines the currency of realism in the cultural and political discourses of the state. Rather, the legitimacy of the mass cultural expressions of melodrama in the public sphere reflects broader structural transformations within the public sphere itself. The transition from a print-mediated public sphere with regional newspapers as its locus to one shaped by visual media and a digital media culture is key in this regard. The rise of television and digital media platforms especially, YouTube and other new media platforms, has significantly altered the dynamics of media generated public sphere with their emphasis on spectacle and immediacy. It paved the way for the emergence of many new players as the interlocutors of public rationality. This is also in parallel to the shifting material and cultural mobility of diverse community groups, who now assert themselves as powerful counter publics rooted through community owned media houses, popular cinema and so on. The hyper visibility and the performative dimensions of these melodramatic spectacles needs to be understood in relation to the peculiar political, cultural, economic and media ecosystems in which it is located. Hence, what I have proposed is not a totalizing shift towards melodramatic public culture with internet-driven visual media ecosystems and their convergence cultures in Kerala. Instead, it has to do more with how the state and other actors co-opt, facilitate and mobilise upon spectacles by rationalising its affective excess.

However, the corporeality of these populist sentiments, which ruptures the historical privileging of realism as the dominant mode of public culture in Kerala, is indicative of the larger cultural intensity of melodramatic cultural politics in South India. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that the public's 'irrational' outbursts and conflicts with state power in Kerala remain far less in comparison to the emotional fervor displayed by the Tamil and Telugu public in their negotiations for supra-national structures through cultural and political idioms of linguistic sub nationalism. One key reason is that their frenzied reactions, including self-immolations and massive public enthusiasm in the funerals of specific legendary political icons, stem from a deep political identification with the star figure, whose cine-political persona provided them a substitute political existence amid a

congenital identity crisis (Prasad 2014). Similarly, while the visual populism of martyr imagery and mourning discourses mobilises remarkable symbolic and cultural capital to the Left in Kerala, its impact remains limited when contrasted with the affective power of cinematic populism and star charisma wielded by actor turned-political leaders in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and the political parties they formed, especially DMK in Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, the melodramatic intensity with which Tamil cinema confronts institutional structures, caste, state, police, etc. often unfolds with far more visceral, grotesque spectacles when compared to Malayalam cinema, where melodrama is repurposed to serve the progressive self-image of the industry.

In addition, I acknowledge the limitations of this thesis in engaging with the ritualistic and ceremonial aspects of mourning, especially given that mourning practices in India are deeply governed by the deceased's religion, caste and community identities. While this study seeks to trace a visual culture of public mourning, it specifically focuses on public forms of mourning that extend beyond domestic or familial spaces. My focus on the sociality of mourning collectives, as analysed in this study, is thus not in relation to the corporeal engagement with death that manifests via culturally codified rituals and their spatial practices. Instead, the performative intensities of mourning rituals are examined as affective sites to understand the transgressive potentials of the mourning subjects and their melodramatic spectacularism. Mourning and grief are thus approached either as symbolic outcries or as affective expressions of melodramatic excess that potentially embody the tensions inherent in dominant discourses of public rationality within Kerala's public sphere.

Similarly, the thesis focuses exclusively on the visual cultural dynamics of the visceral intensities of public mourning. Although other sensory experiences of mourning are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of mass grieving as a public spectacle in Kerala, they fall outside the current scope of this thesis. In addition, I acknowledge that the comparative cultural context of thesis has been limited to South India, although similar cultural expressions of melodramatic mass cultural expressions find crucial political and discursive valences in other parts of India,

especially in the remarkable public attendance at funerals of key political figures in Maharashtra, the translation of political violence into electoral power in West Bengal and so on. These concerns, alongside deeper engagement with identity-specific mourning practices, present key avenues for future research on mourning cultures and their negotiations with the public sphere.

Yet, what makes melodramatic tendencies of Kerala's public culture analytically significant is its dialectical tension with the state's rational foundations. This tension manifests in a historical burden on Kerala to 'sanitise' its public sphere, a legacy rooted in the cultural capital of a print-dominated public sphere. Yet, it repeatedly finds itself negotiating with affective excesses that its realist cultural habitus refuses to accommodate. Therefore, as this thesis demonstrates, the eruption of melodramatic excesses into the public domain compels the state into an uneasy negotiation, leading to a reconfiguration of melodramatic forms within Kerala's political culture.

What cultural and political dynamics underlie these negotiations? My research reveals that these appropriations function as further mechanisms to rationalise the visceral surplus of mourning sites within the progressive cultural idioms. Here, the state strategically allows the monumental emotional displays of the public, but only within the structured bounds of a realist civic framework. This paradox becomes most visible during celebrity funerals, since the state allows the temporary reclamation of the political through the dead body of the cultural sovereign during their final journey. Ironically, state functionaries and bureaucratic procedures facilitate the monarchic grandeur of these funerals, thereby allowing melodramas' acknowledgement as a public culture. The state then rationalises the melodramatic populist tendencies evident in public enthusiasm for celebrity funerals because the stardom granted to public figures during their final journeys functions as a diffuse cultural value.

However, it is important to note that the state tolerates this public assertion of cultural sovereignty largely because the dramatic grandeur of these funerals is driven more by death itself than by the celebrities' life achievements. In the case of cinema, the melodramatic intensity and the transgressive surplus of mourning publics have

been strategically adopted to reinforce the rational, progressive self-image of contemporary Malayalam cinema in the reformed idioms of progressive melodrama. The expansion of its diegetic territories through an evolving engagement with the cultural lives of distinct community groups is thus appropriated to bolster the argument that compelling storytelling can outperform big-budget productions, especially in light of Malayalam cinema's growing panIndian appeal, facilitated by the OTT platforms and the subtitling momentum that overcomes linguistic barriers. Overall, the heightened melodrama in these films has been emphasised to showcase the narrative ambitions of Malayalam cinema, contributing to broader discourses around the rational, progressive Malayali spectator. One could also argue that this negotiation has effectively endowed Malayalam cinema with a reformed populist idiom- melodramatic realism- that has significantly expanded its reach, in contrast to the more limited appeal of traditional realist cinema, which nonetheless remains the cornerstone of Malayalam cinema's progressive self-image

Therefore, rather than engaging these melodramatic spectacles as mere manifestations of counter public spheres, it is imperative to analyse them as collectives bound by visceral grief and shared loss, similar to Berlant's (2009) idea of intimate publics that operate beside formal politics. In line with this argument, my thesis has demonstrated how mourning publics in Kerala reveals themselves as juxta political formations of melodrama, obliquely related to official politics, neither fully oppositional nor assimilable within the valences of a rational modern public sphere in the cultural politics of the state. Even as their affective intensities expose the limits of the state's claims of rationalist mediation of affect, they also constitute an alternative infrastructure for political mobilisation for the democratic edifices of the state. What is evident here is not just the porous boundary between melodrama and realism in Kerala's public life but also their relational entanglement in shaping the public sphere.

It is in this context that the term juxta political formations of melodrama embody this conflict, as their public lives in the form of sentimental or affective narratives in close proximity to the political while not being articulating in the formal idioms of political cultures. Melodrama, thus, beside formal politics and official structures urging the moral urgency for collective action. In

short, Kerala's conflicting relationship with melodrama arises from this dialectical tension with realism and its underpinnings to the cultural history. The juxta political formations of melodrama however compel the state and its functionaries into an uneasy negotiation either to accommodate or co-opt it. The affective negotiations of these mourning sites thus manifest an 'affective dialectic', where state power and public emotion mutually constitute and destabilize one another through perpetual negotiation.

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## Filmography

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- Chaappa Kurishu*. Directed by Sameer Thahir, Magic Frames, 2011.
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- Dhruvam*. Directed by Joshiy, Sunitha Productions, 1993.
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