



<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n3.40>

Changing Paradigms: The Impact of Globalization on Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

Malayalam cinema has evolved significantly due to globalization, transitioning from a regional art form to a globally recognized industry. The industry's evolution can be traced through distinct phases, including its "Golden Era" from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, characterized by a blend of artistic and commercial success rooted in local literary traditions and social themes. The economic liberalization of India and the Gulf migration boom in the 1990s injected capital, leading to a rise in film production and new market opportunities. This economic shift, combined with exposure to global cinematic trends, profoundly influenced the industry's financial structure, technological foundation, and aesthetic identity. The "New Generation" film movement, which began in the early 2010s, exemplifies this transformation. This movement blends global styles, such as unconventional camera work and non-linear narratives, with local themes, offering a fresh, modern take on storytelling while remaining culturally authentic. Ultimately, Malayalam cinema has successfully merged global influences with its unique cultural identity to achieve international acclaim.

Keywords: Globalization, Malayalam Cinema, New wave, Hollywood influences, New Generation

Malayalam cinema, also known as "Mollywood", is a prominent segment of Indian cinema dedicated to producing films in the Malayalam language. Known for its strong storytelling, powerful performances, and socially relevant themes, the industry is often regarded as one of India's most critically acclaimed film industries. Its history is deeply rooted in political engagement, literature, and a strong film society movement that emerged in the 1970s. Malayalam cinema, has undergone a profound transformation in the era of globalization, emerging as a distinctive force that bridges local cultural authenticity with universal storytelling appeal. Malayalam cinema's journey from regional confines to global recognition

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reflects broader patterns of cultural globalization in post-liberalization India. The industry's evolution can be traced through distinct phases: the early period of mythological and social themes (1928-1970s), the parallel cinema movement or "New Wave" (1970s-1990s), and the contemporary "New Generation" films (2010s-present).

Globalization and the economic liberalization of India in the 1990s marked a watershed moment, introducing foreign investments, multinational corporate involvement, and exposure to global cinematic trends. This period coincided with the Gulf migration boom from Kerala, which not only brought economic prosperity but also created a transnational cultural consciousness that would profoundly influence cinematic narratives. Globalization has served as a multi-layered catalyst on Malayalam cinema, profoundly altering the industry's financial structure, technological foundation, and aesthetic identity. This process has presented both unprecedented opportunities for global reach and significant challenges related to cultural preservation and commercialization.

To understand the profound changes wrought by globalization, it is essential to first contextualize Malayalam cinema's identity in its pre-globalized form. The period between 1975 and 1990 is generally considered as the industry's "Golden Era". It was a time defined by a remarkably perfect blend of artistic and commercial success. Filmmaking during this period was deeply intertwined with the state's rich literary traditions and a strong film society movement. The director was considered the most important person behind a film, distinguishing it from other Indian film industries where stars held sway. The industry at this time consciously forged a unique cultural and linguistic identity. Originally based in Thiruvananthapuram and later shifted to Chennai, the industry's relocation back to Kerala by the late 1980s was a strategic move to enable Malayalees to create their own aesthetics and culture. Art cinema, on the other hand, were created by film societies or government aids.

The production of art house cinema was aided by, and in turn became the context for, the efforts by the state to move the film industry to Kerala. At the production level, these films were shot mostly within the state, and used facilities provided by the government. In 1969, the Kerala government appointed a committee under the chairmanship of novelist and scriptwriter, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, to look into the industrial aspects of cinema, with emphasis on promoting film production within the state. (Radhakrishnan, 224)

Films focused on socially conscious themes rooted in local realities, such as caste and class exploitation, the fight against obscurantist beliefs, and the break-up of the joint-family system. While the themes were distinctly local, the aesthetics were not entirely insular. The growth of the film society movement introduced Malayali enthusiasts to the works of French and Italian New Wave directors, which in turn inspired neorealistic films like *Newspaper Boy* (1955). Trailblazing directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G. Aravindan redefined Indian cinema with their introspective and socially conscious films. This historical borrowing of cinematic form, while preserving deeply local content, demonstrates a pattern of thoughtful cultural exchange that foreshadowed the later "New Generation" movement, which would similarly

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adopt global styles to express local themes. The pre-globalization era was typified by what may be termed as masculine-dominant discourses, in which heroic protagonists such as Jagganathan from *Aaram Thampuram* (1997), Narasimha Mannadiar from *Dhruvam* (1993), and Bharathchandran IPS from *Commissioner* (1994) portrayed ultimate authority figures who dispensed justice within conventional structures. Pre-globalization Malayalam cinema was marked by a unique combination of artistic purity, social awareness, and cultural realism that separated it from the run-of-the-mill Bollywood productions. The period was dominated by three path-paving directors – Padmarajan, Bharathan, and K.G. George – who created what later became known as middle-stream cinema, effectively spanning the gap between concurrent art films and mainstream commercial entertainment. Malayalam cinema by the 1980s had gained a captivating cinematic language that communicated with the social and aesthetic fancy of the multitude, achieving full autonomy from the Tamil film industry and regaining an authenticity of culture in terms of its making and expressions. This period saw the rise of advanced storytelling methods, sensitive characterization, and thematic investigations that managed to address complicated social realities without sacrificing commercial viability, as seen in the cases of *Peruvazhiyambalam* (1979), *Yavanika* (1982), and *Panchavadi Palam* (1984).

Pre-globalization Malayalam film's thematic concerns were thoroughly entrenched in Kerala society, with the films' narratives largely examining rural-urban conflicts, familial roles, and the shifting parameters of Kerala society. Cinematics reinforced this image constantly by depicting cities as isolating and exploitative places where heroes ventured forth from villages in pursuit of wealth, fleeing the suffocating realities of poverty and rural vulnerability. This dichotomy placed village life as inherently pure and morally elevated, while urban settings were represented as corrupting influences that challenged traditional values and social cohesion. The cultural setting of this previous stage represented deeply ingrained feudal values, whereby the hero would journey from the city back to defend village innocence and values, characterizing the city as a corrupt place while idealizing village innocence. Such stories sustained conventional social hierarchies and gender roles, marked by sharp distinctions between household and public spaces, and heroes who were valorised for upholding accepted social order instead of subverting it. The transformation from this base to present-day globalized narratives is a radical departure in both cultural representation as well as social awareness in Malayalam cinema.

The era also saw the distinctive engagement of Malayalam cinema with Gulf migration, which was starting to shape both the business model of the industry and its thematic preoccupations, as remittance funds brought economic security while generating new social anxieties about migration, family dislocation, and shifting economic arrangements. The pre-globalization era saw the rise of what one may call “revivalistic attitudes” that generated a culture of tolerance among audiences toward the importation of traditional past to legitimize modern-day social realities. This revivalism was most visibly seen in the portrayal of caste, class, and patriarchal order, with films revealing an unprecedented but assertive presence of

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upper caste groups and a reactionary mindset towards feudal hierarchies. The era witnessed the emergence of neo-feudal, hegemonic, and hypermasculine cinema such as *Devasuram* (1993), *Aaram Thampuram* (1997), and *Commissioner* (1994), which systematically built symbols of patronizing and fair feudal lords and wiped out historical struggles against caste, feudal, and patriarchal oppressions from Malayalam cultural memory. These movies developed ideological spaces grounded in conservatism and traditionalism while at the same time having contact with capitalist modernity, an indication of the conflicting social strains within a Kerala society beset by progressive desire and feudal longings.

Women's representation within pre-globalization Malayalam cinema is a multifaceted landscape in which women were largely contained within binary representational frameworks as sacrificial, domesticated "good women" or demanding, non-compliant "bad women" to be corrected by patriarchal force. Films such as *Thaniyavarthanam* (1987) reflected the era's inclination to put mothers on pedestals by emotionally manipulative storylines, whereas films such as *Thalayana Manthram* (1990), *Bharya* (1994), and *Vatsalyam* (1993) routinely characterized women seeking independence or material enhancement as greedy and in need of moral correction. The period's handling of female characters was characterized by deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes in which women's value was assessed in terms of their adherence to traditional domestic functions and submission of personal aspirations for the sake of family harmony. Even positive female characters eventually succumbed to patriarchal reformation, frequently in the form of physical assault or emotional manipulation intended to reestablish traditional gender conventions. This trend also carried over to the handling of sexuality and virginity, with movies such as *Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu* (1998) and *Chandrostavam* centring around male heroes' fixated preoccupation with the chastity and purity of women.

Pre-globalization Malayalam cinema's artistic and technical traits were marked by their focus on realistic depictions, naturalistic dialogue, and close-to-life story-telling techniques that privileged character development over spectacle. Directors such as Padmarajan and Bharathan became experts in dealing with sexuality on the screen with unexampled nuance, adapting themes and narrative methods heretofore unseen in Malayalam cinema. The aesthetic of the time was marked by the incorporation of real locations from villages, lighting that was natural, and naturalistic regional dialects that added to the realism and local specificity of the films. Movies were either produced on limited budgets, which required creative answers that finally led to their visual uniqueness and realistic ambiance. The use of Kerala's natural landscape – backwaters, paddy fields, and traditional buildings – was not used as mere setting but as integral elements in the narrative that supported the movies' cultural authenticity and regional identity. Films such as *Amaram* (1991) and *Rathinirvedam* (1978) set the example, employing the landscapes of Kerala as an organic part of their narratives while exploring humanity, social change, and cultural identity with great artistic acumen.

The most significant early impact of globalization on Malayalam cinema was economic, primarily driven by the massive scale of Gulf migration. The outflow of Malayalis to the Middle East led to an unprecedented inflow of 'Gulf money' in the form of remittances,

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which made the Malayalam film industry increasingly capitalist by the mid-1970s. This infusion of capital had both constructive and destructive effects. On the one hand, it provided new financial sources, often from Non-Resident Keralites (NRIs), which led to a tremendous rise in the number of films produced from an average of 20 per year in the 1960s to over 100 in the 1980s. This newfound wealth also fuelled an exponential growth of film theatres, especially in rural areas, making cinema more accessible to the working class whose wages had increased due to the migration boom.

The evolution of Malayalam cinema under the impact of globalization is one of the most profound cultural transformations in modern Indian regional cinema, a transition from traditional storytelling inspired by the feudal past of Kerala to forward-looking narratives that resonate with global issues retaining local authenticity. This development, especially noticeable in the rise of the Malayalam New Wave of 2024 and 2025, illustrates how globalization has not only altered the technological side of filmmaking but has greatly changed the social awareness and cultural representation of Malayalam cinema. The power of the industry in merging local cultural stories with global themes, using digital platforms to share with global audiences both domestically and globally, has brought about this new model where movies such as *Varathan*, *Angamaly Diaries*, and *Jallikattu* are the examples that represent this cultural shift

The financial and technological globalization has been matched by a striking aesthetic and narrative transformation in Malayalam cinema, summarized by the “New Generation” film movement that commenced in the early 2010s. The movement was a conscious artistic reaction against the earlier period, which had been faulted for its formulaic plots and the stranglehold of superstars that controlled the industry. The New Generation movement was characterized by fresh and unorthodox themes and a deliberate departure from traditional conventions. The aesthetic organising principle at the heart of this new generation is a highly evolved combination of the global and the local. While formats and styles are deeply influenced by global trends, their thematics are firmly rooted in Malayali life and mindscapes. This is an extension of the convention of taking form from world cinema, only on a much bigger scale. The movement welcomed unconventional camera work, experimental editing, nonlinear narratives, and quick pacing, as in films like *Traffic* and *Chaappa Kurishu*. This change in style was preceded by a basic change of content. The subjects shifted from the village, depicting the essential goodness of rural life, to increasingly city and metro-based locations. The traditional, invincible, masculine hero was supplanted by closer-to-life and more human heroes. The depiction of women changed fundamentally as well; they were no longer restricted to limiting roles and were shown as independent, working women who openly defied social mores. The movement also addressed themes previously taboo, including sexuality, personal ambition, and the existence of gender minorities and homosexuals.

After Globalization Hollywood has been a source of inspiration, for Malayalam cinema. This influence can be seen across filmmaking, from storytelling and genre conventions to technical realization. The “new generation” film trend in Malayalam cinema beginning in the

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early 2010s is a good case in point. These movies tended to adopt another type of narrative, shifting from traditional plots toward new, city-focused narratives. Although still grounded in local traditions, their narrative style, editing patterns, and overall cinematic idiom were frequently heavily infused with international trends, including Hollywood ones. One major area of Hollywood's impact on Malayalam cinema is direct adaptation or inspiration of American movies. Many Malayalam movies have been noted for having plots, character arcs, and even specific scenes that bear striking similarities to Hollywood productions. For example, Amal Neerad's *Big B* has been said to be based on the American movie *Four Brothers*, and *Anwar* borrowed from *Traitor*. Priyadarshan's *Vettam* is also known as an adaptation of the Hollywood screwball comedy *French Kiss*. This trend, though sometimes decried as a lack of originality, has also led to popular movies that spoke to local viewers by incorporating Hollywood-type plots with a particular Malayalam twist.

Big B, directed by Amal Neerad, is also one of the biggest proofs of Hollywood's impact on Malayalam films as an unofficial remake of the 2005 Hollywood movie *Four Brothers*. Even with this explicit inspiration, the film went on to become a trailblazer in the history of Malayalam cinema thanks to its chic filmmaking style, bringing about new cinematographic styles that would later inspire modern Malayalam directors. The neo-noir style of the film and action scenes, though based on the sensibilities of Hollywood, were tweaked to make them suitable for themes appropriate for Kerala's social climate, eventually reaching cult status and being considered one of the signature films of the Malayalam New Wave. *Anwar*, another directorial effort by Amal Neerad, borrowed its plot points directly from the 2008 Hollywood film *Traitor* with Don Cheadle and Guy Pearce. The movie was able to transplant the narrative setup of the Hollywood thriller of undercover activities and terrorist penetration into the Indian situation, positioning itself around the Coimbatore bomb blast case. What set *Anwar* apart from a mere imitation was its incorporation of local elements, such as Tamil dialogue and local political relations, without sacrificing the psychological depth of its Hollywood equivalent. The movie, *China Town* (2011) is a lighter take on Hollywood adaptation and is loosely inspired by Todd Phillips' comedy success *The Hangover* (2009). Directed by Rafi-Mecartin, the movie translated its Hollywood original's bachelor party disaster premise into one of three friends from Kerala who go to Goa in order to stake a claim over their family casino. While maintaining the comedic form of surprise adventures and camaraderie from *The Hangover*, the movie used clearly Malayalam themes of family pride, local don culture, and regional sense of humour. The 2004 Malayalam movie *Vettam*, which was directed by Priyadarshan, is a straight remake of the 1995 Hollywood screwball comedy *French Kiss*. The two movies have the same basic idea and most of the same plot points. The main female character in both is a female who goes abroad to confront the unfaithful fiancé. Along the way, she gets involved with a charming thief who has pilfered a valuable object and stashed it in her luggage to avoid the police. What follows is a series of slapstick misadventures as they try to retrieve the pilfered object while juggling their newfound attraction to each other. The most striking difference between the two movies is their cultural context and style. *Vettam*

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brings this story to an Indian context, with its own brand of humor and local sensibilities. Though it is an adaptation, *Vettam* has gained its own set of fans and is regarded as a cult classic in Malayalam film, valued for the comic act of its cast and Priyadarshan's style.

In addition to direct storyline roles, Hollywood's impact is also evident in the style and technical development of Malayalam cinema. Contemporary Malayalam films, especially those of the new generation movement, have incorporated more advanced camera usage, sound design, and editing processes comparable to global standards. Movies such as *Aadujeevitham* (The Goat Life) and *Manjummel Boys* are fine instances of how Malayalam cinema has raised its technical finesse to produce survival epics and thrillers that can compete with Hollywood productions in terms of intensity and visual splendour. This has enabled filmmakers to present more intricate narratives and give a more immersive experience to the audience, showing they can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Hollywood blockbusters.

But this impact is not a unidirectional process. Borrowing from Hollywood, Malayalam cinema has also been true to its own distinct identity, using realistic and character-based storytelling, often addressing social issues with a nuance and depth that may not always be present in mainstream Hollywood fare. The success of movies like *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Kaathal - The Core* proves that although technical inspirations can be Western, the soul and essence of Malayalam cinema are still deeply rooted within its cultural and social fabric. This is what gives Malayalam cinema of today such a strong appeal and global recognition.

Another major impact of Globalization on Malayalam cinema is the digital revolution and cultural accessibility. The rise of digital technology and streaming services has acted as a catalyst for deep-seated cultural change in Malayalam cinema, radically transforming the manner in which stories get conceptualized, produced, and received. Digital media such as *Netflix*, *Amazon Prime Video*, and local content aggregators have transformed film distribution by making available viable markets for regional films to be made accessible to global populations, thus democratizing content consumption and allowing new-age storytelling from Kerala find its way into homes across the world. This revolution in technology has enabled independent filmmakers to circumvent existing distribution hurdles and reach audiences from various geographical and cultural frontiers directly, allowing cross-cultural exchanges where audiences from various backgrounds can exchange readings and understandings.

Globalization is not a single, monolithic force but a dynamic, multi-layered process which has deeply and irreversibly remoulded Malayalam cinema. It has changed the industry from a regionally specific art form, admired for its distinctive social and political awareness, to a global stakeholder. The financial injection of Gulf diaspora money, though initially resulting in decreased artistic value, ultimately funded the growth of the industry and the infrastructure. The digital revolution and the advent of OTT platforms became the defining technological driver, democratizing cinema and shattering geographical and language obstacles to provide Malayalam cinema with a global audience and unheard-of creative autonomy. The New Generation movement, in turn, incorporated these international influences to renew the industry's visual and narrative essence. But the global journey comes with a paradox.

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While it has provided Malayalam cinema with a global platform, it has also brought in the danger of cultural homogenization, a new generation of external threats, and the possibility of misrepresentation. The Malayalam film industry will be shaped in the future by how it resolves this duality. The sector will have to use the opportunities of international platforms and collaborations while working proactively to maintain the rootedness of its themes and the singularity of its cultural identity. The success of such films, which combine a global look with a local soul, is proof that this confluence is possible and is what will help it hold on to the artistic integrity that originally made Malayalam cinema a critical favourite of the world.

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