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Sartorial Representation of the Mukkuvar Community in Malayalam Cinema: Analysing *Chemmeen* (1965) and *Puthiya Theerangal* (2012)

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Abstract

Caste-based discrimination remains deeply ingrained in Indian society, with clothing historically functioning as a marker of social hierarchy. For most marginalized communities, clothing has acted as a barrier to exclusion—excluding them from certain fabrics, styles, or even colours. In cinema, clothing has become a vital way of visually encoding caste distinctions while reinforcing or subverting social realities through costume design. The representation of caste dynamics in the Malayalam film industry explores the complexities of caste identity and violence as well as the socio-political realities of marginalized communities (Karthika). This study examines the costume depiction of low-caste characters of two Malayalam films from different time periods. It looks into how these visual markers of caste identity have evolved in response to socio-political transformations and whether their portrayals in cinema challenge or perpetuate caste-based hierarchies.

Clothing was also an instrument of resistance in movements such as the Channar Revolt, where women of oppressed castes fought for the right to cover their upper bodies, and in the Swadeshi movement, which wore indigenous fabric to signify resistance to the economic exploitation by the colonial forces. Sartorial choices in cinema form an important tool for understanding the intricacies of caste dynamics. This study uses a qualitative methodology, combining historical analysis and sartorial semiotics. The investigation will also consider how clothing in cinema captures power relations. A comparative approach will trace the development of these representations, pointing out changes in the representation of lower-caste clothing in contemporary contexts. The study underlines the importance of costume design as a tool of both oppression and empowerment, showing how it has been used to shape audience perceptions of caste identity and social mobility.

Keywords: *Visual Culture, Caste and Clothing, Sartorial Semiotics, Malayalam Cinema*

1. Introduction

1.1 Caste System in Kerala

India's caste system originated from the ancient Varna system, which classified individuals according to their occupations. The caste hierarchy has now developed into a strict framework that continues to shape contemporary society (Kafle). Society is divided into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, and Dalits are marginalized outside this system, which has long affected access to resources, opportunities, and cultural representation (Goghari and Kusi; Kapur).

In contrast to the more rigid Varna system of northern India, caste society in Kerala developed into a highly ritualized stratification that was closely tied to ritual purity, land ownership, and occupational status. Kerala's fishing communities, such as the Mukkuvas and Arayas, have deep historical roots in the region. Fishing was the main occupation of these communities, predating agriculture. It played an important role in the economic development of the region. Their origins can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, with groups such as the Minas and Parasavas playing a central role in shaping Kerala's coastal economy (Theesmas). References to these communities can be found during the Sangam period (1st century BC to 4th century AD) when they were part of the coastal Neithal Tinai of ancient Tamilakam (Mathew). The Sangam era corresponds to the 1st century BC. Between BC and 4th century AD, Sangham writings make explicit references to fishing communities and their lives. Time Then, the coastal zone was called neithal tinai. The ancient Tamilakam, which included present-day Kerala, had been divided into five eco-cultural zones, each having its cultural adaptations. The people living in the mountain zone were identified as hunters; the people of the forest as herdsmen; those of the fertile plains as cultivators; those in deserts as warriors; and people of the coastal zone as Minavar or Valainar or Valaipparadava referring to fishermen (Mathew).

With the establishment of Mantra-Mimamsa traditions in the 8th century CE, however, came increasing rigidity in the caste system. Nambudiri Brahmins' migrations played a focal point in restructuring Kerala society. They claimed supremacy over temples, religious rituals, and land, adding greater validity to their position at the pinnacle of society. The mobility of the Nambudiri Brahmins was pivotal in the reorganisation of Kerala's social order, centralising power for the control of temples, religious rituals, and land. The Brahmin-Nair regime created a strong jāti order that had purity and pollution as the core of social life. Nairs, positioned between the Brahmins and the lower castes, were enforcing caste rules, while lower castes like the Ezhavas and Pulayas endured routine discrimination, including untouchability and bonded labour.

The rise of landholdings, which helped the rise of power of Brahmins and Nairs, gave very less opportunities for lower castes, which resulted inless social mobility. But with the rise of social reform movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, led by imminent figures such as Sree Narayana

Guru and Ayyankali, challenged caste oppression and worked towards promoting equality. These movements laid the groundwork for gradually transforming Kerala's caste dynamics.

1.2 The Sartorial and Caste Narratives

Throughout the ages, caste was used to determine clothing and style. The Dharmasūtras of the first millennium B. C. mention the clothes that needs to be worn by different castes; in the Manusmṛti, members of the Chandāla community were to live outside the villages wearing clothes made from the dead and black iron ornaments (qtd. in Olivelle).

As time progressed into the medieval period, it noted an increased number of subcastes, and the interplay of dress and caste became quite complicated. Clothes of Nairs became very different from that of Namboothiri Brahmins. For many years, the oppressed community possessed very less clothes. Jewelry became an item for discrimination and identification between te upper caste and the lower caste. This kind of discrimination led to the belief that if a person from the lower caste covers their upper body in public, then its considered as an insult to the upper caste. Throughout history, Indians did not cover their upper body, but that changed due to Islamic and European influenece in clothing. By the 19th century, in the Travancore-Brahminical State, the caste marker in distinguishing the two communities came from when a woman would cover her upper body; and the women of the backward castes were not allowed to cover their upper body in public.

Even women of socially dominant castes, such as Nairs, were subjected to discriminatory customs that required them to keep their upper bodies revealed in front of the Brahmins. Even more distressing was the widespread institutionalized oppression of women from marginalized communities, such as Nadars and Ezhavas, by virtue of the imposition of the Mulakkaram(breast tax) in the erstwhile Brahminical kingdom of Travancore that was demanded from women of these communities if they opted to cover their breasts, hence justified the caste-based control over bodily autonomy.

A series of revolts collectively known as the Channar Revolt from 1813 to 1859 mounted resistance to the sartorial oppression of all. Protests began when the women of Christian Nadar were fighting for the right to cover their upper bodies: in return came a partial concession in the form of the kuppayam, a long-sleeved blouse similar to one that was worn by women of Syrian Christians and Mappila Muslims. But they were still denied any upper caste-specific forms of clothing. The kingdom of Travancore also had many taxes imposed on clothing to police the lower caste communities under various reasons. Some of those included the *Meesha kazhcha* (moustache tax) imposed on lower caste men for growing facial hair moustache, and *Meniponnu* for Ezhava and Vannar communities, if they wear any gold ornaments. The Pulayar women had to wear kallumala, which is a chain of stone beads. The Kallumala Samaram of 1915, started by the Pulayar community, remains a major event in the history of sartorial resistance. The social reformer Mahatma Ayyankali had an impactful part in this,

Pulayar women publicly threw away their kallumala, asserting their rights to be dressed according to their dignity and agency. Though the Mulakkaram was abolished by a formal declaration in 1924, these types of oppression in clothing, survived well into the colonial and modern era, which established caste discrimination.

In his *Annihilation of Caste*, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1936/2014) recounts numerous examples of caste-based clothing restrictions. Under Peshwa rule, Dalits were subjected to degrading dress codes to reinforce their exclusion:

> The untouchable was not allowed to use public streets if a Hindu was coming along, lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The untouchable was required to wear a black thread either on his wrist or around his neck... in Poona, the untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot... for holding his spit, lest his spit falling on the earth should pollute a Hindu (Ambedkar 85).

Ambedkar also discusses sartorial discrimination faced by the Balai community, who were prohibited from wearing specific clothing like gold-lace-bordered pugrees or dhotis with colored borders (Ambedkar 92). These historical examples underscore how clothing reinforced socio-political hierarchies, marking lower castes through dress codes.

1.3 Malayalam Cinema and Caste Narratives

Malayalam cinema has been widely acclaimed for its socially, politically and culturally moving storytelling. Analysing its caste narratives and reflections of social hierarchies, there have been no explicit takes on casteism, or challenging them until recent times. Early Malayalam films often adhered to stereotypes, using caste-based violence to elicit emotional responses, thus reflecting the rigid social structure of the time (Karthika).

In its history, Malayalam cinema has mostly narrated stories exalting upper-caste pride through caste representation. Mammootty, Mohanlal, and Suresh Gopi most renowned actors in Kerala- have exemplified such roles in a manner that establishes caste hierarchies. Commercial hits such as *Dhruvam*, *Aryan*, *Mahatma*, and *Adiverukal* valorize upper-caste identity while maligning affirmative action policies of the time as detrimental to the upper-caste population, and contrary to the interest of the upper castes. *The Mahatma*, scripted by T. Damodaran, stands out for its overtly casteist and communal biases against the backdrop of a spate of screenplays that display similar traits scripted by Damodaran. Yet, it is only recently that Caste was being dealt with in subtler and more inclusive representations while addressing the various forms of violence that have identified it. Historically, however, depictions of marginalized communities by Malayalam films either exoticized them or reduced them to victims who may barely be outlined as Dalit characters of pain suffering or marketed

only in identity-functioning roles of “comic relief” or threats (Nisha 15). So even in the narratives representing caste oppression, the marginalized characters are often depicted as passive victims who wait for upper-caste heroes to rescue them. This scheme mostly worked toward creating a dominant caste perspective rather than highlighting the lived realities of the subaltern communities.

However, one would see a turn by way of films such as *Second Show (2012)* and *Kammattippadam (2016)*, where the protagonists are coming from marginalized backgrounds, yet the agency of the subaltern within the narrative is not completely asserted. In stark contrast, the body of work by actor Kalabhavan Mani radically disrupted the archetype of the traditional, caste-based hero, thereby foregrounding Dalit protagonists. His films have been set apart in their representation of caste identity and challenge the common upper-caste hegemony with respect to hero-centric narratives.

The emergence of films such as *Papilio Buddha (2013)*, *Ozhivu Divasathe Kali* (The Game on the Holiday, 2013), *Kala* (The Weed, 2021), *Nayattu* (The Hunt, 2021), etc. signifies that caste discrimination is taken as a widespread social problem. The reality of rising caste violence informs the motivations behind these releases. While caste oppression in Malayalam cinema has found itself in public and institutional dialogues recently, the domestic aspect of caste violence has been under analyzed. Few films, after all, take it upon themselves to investigate the effects of caste on the family or domestic space, even though many mention the social and political concerns of caste. *Unda* (The Bullet, 2019) and *Anthakshari* (A Musical Game, 2022) briefly depict caste discrimination in institutional structures, especially in law enforcement. These works illustrate the caste prejudices built into the police system, aligning caste alongside other issues in the larger law-and-order paradigm. Films such as *Puzhu* and *Malayankunju* have recently walked away from older outside constructions of revolution to focus on how subaltern characters voice revolt against caste violence in familial structures (Karthika). Such films as *Perariyathavar* question environmental injustice together with urban displacement, showing the casteist sentiments written into Kerala's account of modernity and development (Deb).

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Clothing as a Political Act

The paper, “*Dress as a Tool of Empowerment: The Channar Revolt*” by Keerthana Santhosh discusses how The Channar Revolt, also known as the *Maru Murakkal Samaram,* marked a significant moment in the history of caste, gender, and clothing in colonial Kerala. Santhosh says that the patriarchal structures that are inherent in our society use clothes as an instrument for subordination and objectification (especially in the case of women), and when there is an intersectionality of identities, then women from backward communities were mostly subjected to it. The revolt was triggered by the passing of the "breast tax," which was imposed on women from the lower caste, and the amount of tax

imposed was based on the size of their breasts, and they had to pay this amount if they wanted to cover themselves. The subjugation was as follows: the lower-class women (Ezhava) were not allowed to dress above their waist. Even upper-caste women, who are misinterpreted as more privileged, were also subjected to objectification. Nair community women were expected to expose themselves to priests in temples, while Namboothiri women had to bare themselves to elders. For example, a niece was required to bare herself before her uncles as a sign of respect**.** Santhosh further highlights that the Diwan of Travancore's initial ruling, which allowed Christian converts to cover themselves, notes the intersection of colonialism and missionary activity in this issue. Even though the ruling was later taken back, the revolt still lasted, even further revolving into a broader fight for dignity, equality, and the right to bodily autonomy.

Hardgrave, in his paper *The Breast-Cloth Controversy: Caste Consciousness and Social Change in Southern Travancore*, provides a detailed analysis of the caste dynamics in Southern Colonial India, focusing on the Nadars' position within this system. He examines the origins of the Breast-Cloth Controversy, which emerged as a revolt against caste-based restrictions on women's clothing and delved into the socio-political conditions that fueled the uprising. Hardgrave highlights the role played by Christian missionaries and the British, who both influenced and intervened in the conflict. His work also explores the broader consequences of the revolt, particularly in terms of how it challenged the entrenched caste hierarchy and contributed to social change in the region. The paper is just a recounting of the event in a Western perspective and lacks a deeper analysis of the revolt.

Saurabh Dube's *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950* provides a study of Satnami history. Dube explores the importance of sartorial practices to their religious, social, and political lives while weaving elements of history and anthropology throughout the study to discuss how clothing has been used to construct identity, contest caste-based oppression, and negotiate gender positions. Dube emphasizes the ways in which the Satnamis use dress to reassert their unique identity against a grain of caste-based norms. He provides a case for the Satnamis as active subjects who constructed their narratives with regard to identity and relation to power. More recently, some scholars have critiqued the book arguing that it is too reliant on oral history and memory as sources. They argue that these texts are vulnerable to verification and reliability concerns. Other authors argued that Dube over-emphasized religion as the point of view for understanding Dalit resistance. Instead, economic relations at points such as land and labour are said to have more productive study underemphasized in this work.

Sreebitha P.V.'s article *Dress Reform in Kerala: Question of Caste, Community, and Women* provides a critical analysis of the discourse surrounding dress reform in Kerala with a focus on caste, gender, and community dynamics. The author explores how the uncovering of breasts, traditionally imposed on lower-caste women, symbolized not just a cultural practice but a marker of caste-based subjugation and

inequality. She has based her work using autobiographical accounts generally from C. Kesavan, the major Ezhava social reformer, and scholarly works by J. Devika, Udaya Kumar, and Rajeevan, among others, for her arguments. Sreebitha P.V. claims that the practice of women displaying their breasts in Kerala was not only a matter of gender, but rather one related to caste hierarchies. The reform movement was concerned about caste practice that was not related to women's honor or equality. This highlights how caste was the motivating factor in the reforms, which sought to address social distinctions among castes, not the objectification or oppression of women in general. The paper then illustrates the differences between male and female Ezhava reformers regarding this dress reform. While the practice was shameful for both sexes, the correction was levelled at the humiliation envisioned for the community, rather than a sexualization of women, although males were more focused on the social status of the community based on the dress code, and the females were more engaged with the gender implications more overtly. This sort of parallels the caste pride of communities' identity and gender roles in their collective discourse of dress reform.

In her paper, *"Fashioning 'Body': Sartorial Reforms and Namboothiri Women"*, Dr. Mayadevi M. critically analyses the role of Namboothiri women and how the sartorial reforms affected them. She argues societal concerns have always been central to sartorial choices. Within the framework of patriarchy, the female body was viewed as the property of men or the household society. In the Indian context, a woman's body, particularly her womb, was rigorously safeguarded as she was considered the "gateway" to maintaining caste purity, the entry point into the caste system (Chakravarthi). The greatest perceived threat to caste purity was female sexuality, and this was addressed through strict restrictions on women, such as pre-puberty marriage, and the ideological controls prescribed by Brahmanical patriarchy, like the *Pathivratha dharma*. Women's attire was also determined and dictated by patriarchal needs. While Indian men readily adopted new clothing styles influenced by Western culture and removed traditional hair tufts to suit their professional demands, sartorial change for women was heavily debated. Indian orthodoxy, especially when advocated by male reformers, was not ready to accept similar changes for women. European colonialism led to the formation of a new patriarchy in India, with "new Indian men" eager to reform their women by creating a new form of womanhood through English education and redesigning women's attire. Ironically, *antharjanams*, despite being part of the upper caste and upper-class Kerala society, were among the last to acquire the right to cover their upper bodies. The female body became an expression of the community's morality and social values, and the shifting sense of female sexuality prompted the young Namboothiri men (*Unninamboothirimar*) to advocate for dressing their women. The reformed patriarchy criticized traditional women's attire and designed new clothing to meet its aspirations.

2.2 Representation of Caste in Cinema

Dr Meenakshi Dey's paper, *From Screen to Society: Representations of Poverty and Caste Discrimination in Lagaan, Banaras: A Mystic Love Story, and Peepli Live,* explores how Bollywood films depict the intersection of caste discrimination and poverty in Indian society. By analyzing *Lagaan* (2001), *Banaras: A Mystic Love Story* (2006), and *Peepli Live* (2010), Dey examines the socio-political narratives embedded in these films and their impact on public perception. A key theme in Dey's analysis is how caste hierarchies are represented and their role in perpetuating systemic oppression. In *Lagaan*, the character of Kachra, an untouchable, symbolizes caste-based discrimination. Dey critiques the film's resolution of caste tensions, where Kachra's acceptance into the cricket team is contingent upon his utility rather than genuine social transformation. This portrayal, she argues, reinforces a meritocratic narrative that oversimplifies caste relations. In *Banaras: A Mystic Love Story*, caste is central to the plot through an inter-caste romance between a Brahmin woman and a lower-caste man. Dey examines how the film engages with caste-based prejudices within a religious and spiritual framework. However, she critiques its reliance on mysticism as a means to address caste inequality, arguing that it romanticizes caste relations while sidestepping the material realities of caste oppression.

Saddam Hossain's *The Scattered (Dalit) Spectacles: The Narrative of Indian (Hindi) Films Since the 1940s to Contemporary Time* traces Dalit representation in Hindi cinema from the 1940s onward. Hossain points out how Indian cinema has traditionally marginalized or stereotyped Dalit characters, frequently reducing them to simplistic depictions. During the early post-independence period, Hindi cinema mostly neglected the issue of caste, and nationalist issues along with social reform were on the center stage. When Dalits did find some screen space, as in *Achhut Kanya (1936),* they were presented as passive victims of circumstances and not as agents of change. The 1970s and the 1980s witnessed a change with the advent of parallel cinema, with *Ankur (1974)* and *Manthan (1976)* raising the issue of caste. But these stories tended to have upper-caste heroes as reformers, and the agency of Dalit actors was curtailed. The Dalits were portrayed as either subservient or as rebels, reinforcing stereotypes instead of giving their real lives. The 2010s also witnessed more overt address of caste-based discrimination in films such as *Article 15 (2019)* and *Masaan (2015).* While these films attempted to portray caste oppression, Hossain critiques *Article 15* for its "savior complex," as it tells the Dalit narrative through an upper-caste protagonist, reinforcing a sense of 'othering.' He underscores how mainstream cinema continues to frame Dalit struggles from an upper-caste gaze, limiting genuine Dalit representation. However, he also acknowledges the growing, albeit limited, space for Dalit filmmakers who are actively reshaping these narratives.

2.3 Research Questions

Despite extensive scholarship on the representation of lower-caste communities in Indian cinema, there still is a great deficit of research that pays attention to sartorial practices as modes of caste representation. The present studies are confined either within the portrayals of characters or the socio-political relevance of such depictions, completely omitting the ways clothing can act as a semiotic sign, often reconfirming or subverting caste, its condition and hierarchies.

This study hopes to address the gap by looking into the sartorial representations of lower-caste characters in Indian cinema, especially restricted to the fisherfolk community in Kerala. The study raises the following questions to push the inquiry forward:

In what ways do sartorial representations in these films reinforce or contest the dominant caste hierarchies of their respective times? How has sartorial representation evolved across different film periods?

2.4 Methodology

With a focus on the sartorial representation of lower-caste characters in Indian cinema, this study utilizes semiotic analysis as a mode of examination. As the theory of Roland Barthes explains, semiotics offers a paradigm for understanding clothing as a sign system through which meanings of various socio-political implications are expressed (Barthes).

The key analytical tool is Barthes' fundamental distinction of denotation and connotation: Denotation refers to the literal clothing of the film: the type of clothing, style and colors of the garments characters are wearing. Whereas connotation refers to the actually embedded, cultural-historical ideological meanings in these sartorial choices that reflect larger power structures, caste identities, and social hierarchies. According to Barthes, there are two levels at which visual texts are significated: the denotative level, which offers the immediate, objective meaning of the signs; and the connotative level introduces subjective, culturally constructed meanings (Barthes). Thus, in cinema, clothing is, beyond an aesthetic or functional concern, an indicator of caste-based identities and socio-political positioning. The study shall elaborate on Barthes' symbolization process, which illustrates how signifiers (i.e., visual representations of clothing) and the signified (social meanings lurking behind the clothing choices) come together to form a larger discourse that speaks either about caste oppression or resistance against it.

The second theory alongside semiotic analysis that examines how sartorial representations in film construct and negotiate caste-based identities is Stuart Hall's Representation Theory. According to Hall, systems of representation produce meaning since visual elements such as clothing serve as coded signs representing their social and political understandings. Within this theoretical framework, it is possible

to evaluate how cinematic texts depict lower-caste identities with reference to overarching ideological narratives and whether those ideologies reinforce or contest existing caste hierarchies.

By integrating Barthes' semiotic analysis with Hall's theory of representation, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how sartorial choices in Indian cinema function as a visual lexicon of caste identity, reflecting the socio-political realities of their respective historical contexts.

3. The Mukkavar Community and Sartorial Identity

3.1 The Influence of the Sea on Mukkuvar Culture

The term "Mukkuvar" has two primary etymological origins. The first derivation is from the Tamil word *muk* or *mung*, meaning "dive," directly linked to the community's traditional occupation of deep-sea diving and fishing. The second origin traces to the Tamil word *mukku*, meaning "point" or "corner," referring to their geographical settlements along the coastal fringes (Ram). The etymology origins signify their identity to that of their historical association of the sea and coastal settlement.

The Mukkuvar community primarily sustains itself through marine fishing and fish-related industries. Their profession is broadly categorized into the preparation of fishing equipment and procurement of raw materials, post-fishing activities such as marketing and preservation, and active fishing operations (James). Their methods of fishing are based on knowledge accumulated over generations. Social roles within the community are divided, the men are engaged in deep-sea fishing, while women participate in fish processing and selling. These occupational roles reinforce their social hierarchies based on gender within the caste hierarchy based on occupation. However, in recent times, the advancement of technology and production processes since the 1960s have significantly caned these occupational structures (James).

Fishing is not only a livelihood for the Mukkuvars but also one that is connected to their traditional heritage and beliefs. Any fishing trip includes a series of ritualistic acts that represent the relationship of the community with the sea. One of the most prominent traditions among Mukkuvar fishermen is to remove their turbans from their heads and wear them around their waists before their boats (vallam) are set into the sea. Once they are in the sea, the turbans are tied back onto their heads. This ritual is based on the belief that Kadalamma (Mother Sea) disapproves of fishermen wearing turbans while entering the waters, and ignoring this practice may result in the boat being pushed back to shore. The removal of the turban is also a sign of respect in both Kerala and Tamil Nadu customs (James). Certain prohibitions are also accompanied by fishing expeditions. This is where the fishermen are told to avoid shoes while on board and not to carry any money; otherwise, it will be assumed that Kadalamma will not look kindly at them because she views them as rich. This has to do with the indispensable function of clothing in ritualistic activities, and certain clothing is visually stereotyped in this community.

Based on photographs that were part of an Archives collection, Mukkuvar men can be seen clad in their traditional clothing as early as the 20th century. The historical picture, located at Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, depicts nine Mukkuvar fishermen and their costumes: waistcloths and the umbrella hats known as *thoppi koda* to identify their influence of gender, occupation, and culture. Highlighting the headbands of cloth that were worn by those seated in the front row to support their *thoppi koda* adds yet another perspective on the distinct fashion culture of this community engaged in maritime activities.

Fig. 1. Mukkuvans, Malabar Fishermen. Photograph, ca. 1900. Caption on mount board attributed to Henry Balfour. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession no. 1998.214.10.10.

3.2 Religious Identity and Caste-Based Discrimination

During the Sangam period, caste distinctions were more flexible, and communities were in more harmony and very cooperative, even though there were economic hardships. Fishermen were classified into separate entities like the Mukkuvas, Arayas, Nulayas, Valens, Marakkarakayans, and Paravas. The fishermen were not only engaged in fishing but also involved in pearl gathering, shipbuilding, ship ownership, navigation, and trade, from salt making to any other trade conceivable. Select wealthy members of the community owned large portions of land on which some extravagant houses were located for various community members. Some of the fishermen actually had royal patronage and thus were entitled to a percentage of the catch that traditionally was given to kings and priests, along with the poor, a tradition which persists in many fishing villages today (James). Hindu members of the fisher community occupy the central and northern districts of Kerala and belong to castes like the Arayans, Velans, Mukkuvas, and Marakkans. Unlike other Hindu caste structures, religious matters in the fishing community are not limited to Brahmins. Fisher folk often conduct priestly duties themselves, since it is a community position that is frequently based upon election and appointment (James). The northern districts of Kerala also have a significant Muslim component of the fishing community, which is composed of a considerable social structure and class differentiation. The Mosque represents this community by engaging members in religious and social issues alike. Within the community, decisions are made through a council of the Mosque that is commonly elected. The appointed Imams receive considerable authority and respect. The workings of the Madrassa committees are also part of the religious education and fishing community. It also serves as a council along with the Mosque Council, and both councils have representatives democratically elected from the community (James).

The religious landscape of the fishing communities in Kerala changed when the Portuguese missionaries, especially Saint Francis Xavier, arrived. This was when the organization of evangelization of fisherfolk took place, thereby securing the Church's position over their socio-political structures. In Kerala, 42.4% of the marine fish workers in the state identify as Christian fish workers, also more popularly known as Latin Catholics or Latin Catholic (Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute and Fishery Survey of India 34). The term "Latin Catholic" came into being after the colonization of the land by the Portuguese. Some historians say that Saint Thomas, one of the Twelve Apostles, may have introduced the Christian faith to Mukkuvar, making them among the earliest Christian converts in Trivandrum (James).

James note that the village priest was an ex-officio leader of the community, whereby the Church served as the primary institution (James). The Church's full authority was expressed by continually referring decisions of social, economic, and political matters to ecclesiastical authority. Priests went beyond the role of spiritual counsellor, as priests also prescribed moral conduct and social norms in

Sunday sermons and other religious contexts. Catholic priests are influential in local matters, especially during elections and political movements (James). Mukkuvar community has been considered and subjected to caste discrimination both by caste Hindus and caste-conscious Christians, despite belonging to the Catholic Church for hundreds of years. For centuries, and still today, Christian fish workers in Kerala and Tamil Nadu have been marginalized within the Catholic Church, sometimes denied positions of leadership. The imposed caste system has also diminished the Mukkuvar social status, notwithstanding evidence of their identity as Dravidians and distinguished past (Ram). After independence, the Mukkuvar Community was classified as a 'Most Backward Community' (MBC) in Tamil Nadu and as an 'Other Backward Community' (OBC) in Kerala under various affirmative action categories.

3.3 The Church's Role in Sustaining Caste Hierarchies

According to Kalpana Ram, the Catholic Church mainly continued to take an "accommodationist" position towards the caste system in spite of the revolutionary impact of Christianity (Ram). Instead of opposing the established social order, the Church operated within it from the beginning. Caste was seen by early Roman Catholic missions, starting with the Portuguese, as a neutral framework that allowed conversions to take place without upsetting established social structures. Therefore, the goal of evangelisation was to convert both individuals and entire caste groups while maintaining caste distinctions. The Church thus perpetuated caste-based disparities rather than acting as a catalyst for social emancipation, enabling the Mukkuvar community to persist on the outskirts of prevailing social structures.

This exclusion was evident in institutional practices, particularly in access to religious education. Mukkuvar seminarians were frequently barred from studying in local seminaries and were instead directed to distant institutions, such as those in Bombay, as stipulated by the Congregation of Propaganda in Rome in 1832. The Church's pastoral letters discouraged engagement with non-Catholics, imposed linguistic restrictions on the learning of English, and reinforced adherence to Catholic doctrine as a means of maintaining control (Ram). In addition, the prevalence of foreign bishops over Latin Catholics in Kerala led to a "cross-cultural alienation," as these hierarchs frequently were ill-equipped to understand the cultural practices and lived experiences of the local fishing communities. Therefore, many expressed that they saw the time spent in coastal parishes as a burden, not a community or pastoral call. The Churches' economic dominance exceeded spiritual activities. In many villages, the Churches' landholdings encompassed extensive plantation-based lands. Many also owned coconut groves that solidified the church's economic power. Penalties incurred for breaches of the Churches' law often included substantial monetary excess. The punishments of the Church procedures reincarnated levels of a feudal economy from society (Ram). These exploitations led to considerable aggression from the community, which scholars weeks ex-press direct criticisms directed

towards this simplification approach towards their sanctity the Church elite. For example, Varithaiya, Mary Jaculine, and Justin all criticize the Churches' leadership for failing to cause greater political and economic empowerment for the Mukkuvar community. The scholar's inquiry exposes community feelings of demoralization for religious leadership, see also the Church's historic lack of moral obligation to incite marginalized communities towards positive civic and political levels and participation. In the Christian fishers community's peculiar sports of economy also feature a tax on fisherman, popularly known as Kuthuka, typically amounting to 5%. Kuthuka is auctioned off, and the profits are taxed and used by the Church. Hapke (2001:23) suggested that these fisherfolk are more adaptable and innovative than Hindus and Muslims.

Contrary to this argument, Ram states that Mukkuva Christians now remain marginalized owing to their coastal settlement patterns, dense slum-like living conditions, and poor prospects for rising through the ranks of more comprehensive social hierarchies (Ram). While the Mukkuvar community has managed to penetrate a distinctiveness of religion called Mukkuva Catholicism-a tradition which is accomplished as a handy combination of Catholic tenets with pre-existing Hindu practices and indigenous beliefs, tradition remains inexpressive owing to structural constraints posed by ecclesiastical and caste hierarchies. Mukkuvars, unlike other fisherfolk communities, are heterogeneous with respect to the varieties of religions to which other castes are subscribing, classify themselves under the folds of Catholicism and maintain cultural affiliations with it, thus establishing a coherent spiritual outlook comprising the very attempt to mend their ancestral Neithal (maritime) inheritance with the newly imparted theological aspect by the Portuguese missionaries.

Mukkuva Catholicism is incorporated into the everyday struggles of the community, as the struggle between the historical relationship to and management of the sea, as well as the social adversity faced. Functions, symbols, and rituals socialize a person into accepting hardships while creating unity in society. Becoming a religious life involves much more than mere adherence to a doctrine; it includes corporeal experiences and an awareness of morality towards social relations. Mukkuva is a broad and integrative spirituality, much like the sea itself. It transcends boundaries by integrating traditions in constructing a resilient worldview (Ram).

4. *Chemmeen* (1965) and *Puthiya Theeragnal* (2012)

A landmark Malayalam film, made by Ramu Kariat is *Chemmeen* (1965), which is based on Thyakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's novel and paints a bright picture of the fishing community of Kerala. The story is about Karuthamma, the fisherwoman's daughter, and Pareekutty, the son of a Muslim merchant; their love is destined to fail due to the rigid code of morals and caste traditions of their society. The film's plot features very strongly the belief that the sea goddess, *Kadalamma,* will definitely punish such a woman who is not faithful to her husband while he is at sea. Karuthamma is married to a fisherman,

Palani, although she loves Pareekutty. The film closes on a tragic note when a rumour about Karuthamma results in the death of her husband in the sea, reiterating the everpresent moral codes ruling the community. The film is somewhat misinterpreted in that it is about a woman's agency alone but with deeper analysis, it can also be a critical take on how society is hypocritical and can drive people to isolation.

Sathyan Anthikkad's *Puthiya Theerangal* (2012) presents a more contemporary perspective on fishermen's lives in Kerala. The film tells the tale of Thamara, an orphan who is represented as the only female sailor in the region, therefore challenging the gender roles. Her male friends and peers give her immense support, especially Mohan (Nivin Pauly), who aspires to be a teacher. The film has an element of suspense when Thamara pulls out an elderly man (Nedumudi Venu) from the sea, who she later treats like her father. Unlike *Chemmeen,* which deals with strict societal hierarchies, this film drives toward a more liberal narrative with space for a strong and agency-driven female lead.

4.1 Semiotics That Were Found Common in Both Films

4.1.1 Semiotics of the *Lungi*

The lungi, identified as a signifier in both films, is a simple length of about two meters of cloth usually patterned in floral or checkered designs and worn from the waist down, or at times pulled up to the knees to make a knot. That is worn as casual wear, mostly by men, across south India. It's also worn by people of all genders, cutting across communities.

But in Kerala, the *lung*i or *kalli mundu*, as it's popularly called, is much more than that. The signified refers to more than just the function of clothing; it embodies labor, identity, caste-based occupational dress, etc. As myth, the lungi operates in both the films to affirm the collective identity of fisherfolk, in Barthesian semiotics. This function of the lungi gives a naturalized justification for their social location wherein the lungi sagaciously is depicted as an organic vestment of labor, while at the same time it also separates them from higher caste groups.

The films raise the visual framing of women in lungi to further contravene gendered norms of dressing, thus unsettling the upper caste's ideals of femininity associated with garments such as *mundu* or sari. The lungi works doubly: as both an enabler of bodily movement and a marker of caste and class. The film's fisherwomen are seen to wear it in functional ways that highlight utility over ornamentation, thus setting them apart from the upper-caste women, whose dressing was conventionally puritanical and chaste, bound with notions of purity and propriety (Figure 2). Besides, the lungi opens up an area for rejecting gender binary notions in sartorial discourse. Unlike articles strictly demarcated along gender lines in elitist cultures, in the fisher community, lungis are worn by all genders. This fluidity does not mean equal gender. This rather points to the fact that dress is decided on economic exigencies and not

by anything progressive or socially accepted. The lungi, however, gives way to an adjustment entity curtailed at the knees to enable movement. Over time, this clothing choice reinforces the caste system by tying specific types of work to particular social groups.

Figure 2: Women in Lungis as seen in the movie *Chemmeen*

Because the lungi was associated with manual labour, dominant caste groups viewed it as 'informal' and, therefore, inconvenient to their elitist social spaces. This improperness is slightly shown in *Chemmeen* and in *Puthiya Theeragnal,* where the fisher community is dressed differently and is, therefore, thereby separated from all other upper-caste people. The color and fabric of the lungi themselves give rise to multiple connotations: the lungis of Kerala are known for being vibrant in color, and in the film, the darker and muted shades take centre stage as symbols of strong will against the harshness of coastal existence, things like a checkered or flowery pattern tends to communicate a rather collective orientation, associating the garment with a group. The lungi is a short-hand expression for labor and caste, but also a communal identity in an image rather than as clothing.

In many Christian communities, older women continue to wear the lungi as a casual garment, as seen in the movie *Puthiya Theeragnal*. When the women are at home, the lungi frequently takes the place of the white top and white *mundu* that make up Chattayum Mundum, a dress worn by older women in some Christian families (see Figure 3). Additionally, the lungi is worn in a distinctive way, forming a tiny fishtail at the back.

Figure 3: Chattayum Mundum worm in *Puthiya Theeragnal*

4.1.2 Semiotics of Headgear

In *Chemmeen* (1946) and *Puthiya Theeragnal* (2012), an important aspect of the coastal living of fisherfolk in Kerala's coastal communities features prominently the *thorthu* (a thin cotton towel) and *thopi* (cap) (as seen in figure 4). These two clothing items may be represented semiotically and analysed in the perspective of Stuart Hall's representation theory since they are cultural texts inscribed with socio-political meanings.

The *thorthu* has a two-way function, a practical and a ritualistic one. The fishermen are generally seen removing their *thorthu* from their heads before journeying into the sea or boarding their boats, a symbol that signifies ritual purity and reverence towards the sea, which gives them livelihood. Hall's theory of representation might explain this gesture: through the encoding of symbolic motifs that suggest and reinforce societal standards in the other cultural operations and traditions. But even as the *thorthu* conferred certain status on the body according to the caste hierarchies, it had ritual roles to play.

Figure 4: Fishermen in the films *Chemmeen* and *Puthiya Theeragnal* wearing *thorthu* and *thopi*

Under Kerala's social order, the *thundu* (a kind of towel worn on the shoulder) was the symbol of the might and privilege of the castes. Traditionally, upper-caste men, particularly Brahmins and aristocrats, draped their shoulders with an angavastram, a fine cotton or silk shawl with ornamental zari or brocade borders, which duly marked their socio-economic superiority. In contrast, lower-caste people and outcastes were restricted from wearing a *thundu* on their shoulders in front of the dominant castes; they were instead expected to tie it around their lower bodies or tuck it under their armpits, marking their subordinate status (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Fishermen in the movie *Chemmeen* removing their *thorthu* in respect

An incident from Periyar's life in the 1940s can offer a historical parallel; at a public function, a musician from a lower caste, playing the *nadhaswaram*, had a towel on his shoulder because he needed it while performing. This act was taken as a drift from the order of caste and he was asked that we should remove it immediately. Periyar condemned the act and, ever since, wore a *thundu* in protest

against the sartorial discrimination by caste. In *Chemmeen* and *Puthiya Theeragnal*, the sartorial choices also highlighted the practical utility among coastal labour forces. Warm and humid tropical weather demands cool and light fabrics, and the *thorthu* served as a multipurpose garment protecting the body from the sun, acting as a towel, or even used as a head covering for the purposes of recovery.

4.1.3 Semiotics of *Elassu*

Black threads with silver pendants, a significant cultural marker firmly anchored in social and religious customs, are worn by the women in *Chemmeen* and *Puthiya Theerangal*. In Hindu traditions, tying black threads around the wrist, commonly referred to as *jabbicha charadu,* is believed to serve as a protective measure against negative energies. It is believed to provide spiritual protection and counteract evil forces and is connected to planetary influences, especially those of Shani and Rahu.

Beyond its religious significance, the black thread in these films serves as a symbol of socioeconomic standing and cultural identity. This symbolism is especially clear in *Chemmeen* when Karuthamma is married off, and the silver pendant is replaced with a thali that is more expensive. This seemingly insignificant detail offers a nuanced yet potent critique of her changing socioeconomic status when her father was doing better in his business. Class differences are further highlighted by the contrast between gold and silver in ornamentation—gold denotes wealth, while silver, despite its value, is a step lower on the economic scale. The black thread that Thamara wears around her wrist serves as a symbol of her cultural and religious identity in *Puthiya Theerangal*. The way these accessories are used in both movies emphasises how gender, class, and tradition interact, showing how tangible items have multiple meanings that go beyond aesthetics.

4.2 Sartorial Representation in *Chemmeen*

Chemmeen graphically and narratively conveys a captivating portrayal of Indian society in pre-Independence times, where caste class and religion are employed as both social checks and balances. Most of the characters, belonging either to the lower castes or middle class, depict fishermen families living below the poverty line. Within the social order, workboats owned by the Valakkaran and nets privileged caste economic hierarchy. When a Mukkavan named Chembankunju wants to own his boat and nets, he creates tension in this structure that would break caste-based restrictions that marked the other way and warns of the coming transition into a more individualistic class mobility model. There is minimal clothing for men and women working in the fishing community as compared to the more prosperous.

The class differences (Figure 6) divided between the profile of Pallikunnath Kandankoran, the erstwhile rich nets man, and his wife, Papikunju, who later becomes Chembankunju's second wife, can be seen in the clothing in itself. Among the fisherfolk, their lifestyle and stature became a matter of

suspicion and discussion. Chembankunju was captivated by the splendour of Kandankoran's mansion; it was, for him, a full representation of the wealth and the status he desired to obtain.

Figure 6: The caste distinction seen in *Chemmeen* through clothing

These socioeconomic and political themes are furthered by the film's painstaking attention to costume design. Sathyan portrays Pareekutty, a wealthy Muslim fisherman, who is introduced in vivid green and blue hues with a red handkerchief that emphasises his initial stability. To further demonstrate his wealth, he is first seen wearing an expensive watch. Subtle alterations in his appearance, such as the loss of his watch, progressively shabby clothes, and changes in his physical manner, are signs of his decline as his financial condition worsens. Likewise, Achakunju, Chembankunju's childhood companion, is visually identified by his ripped and frayed shirt, which emphasises his poverty (Figure 7). Such fashion choices clearly frame characters, including Chembankunju's trajectory throughout the film, within their respective political and socioeconomic contexts.

Figure 7: Achakunju in the movie *Chemmeen*

In ancient Sanskrit literature, colors created hierarchies by virtue of connotation. *Sattva* (purity) was equated with white, corresponding to moral and spiritual superiority, while black was always associated with tamas and usually denoted ignorance, greed, and some form of social subordination.

Figure 8: The caste difference seen in the women wearing saree and Karuthamma

Individual colors also denoted the varnas in a similar manner in the Mahabharata: Brahmins wore white, Kshatriyas red, Vaishyas yellow, and Shudras black. Such color coding found its way into images in art and literature where the asuras and other figures being identified with darkness were painted dark in hue, reflecting socio-cultural biases. *Chemmeen* carries forward the sartorial notions in certain scenes. The upper-caste men wear white garments, which reinforce the expected associations of purity, social privilege, and religious authority. The coastal setting carries the imprint of the way the code of dressing acts as a register of caste and, among women, regional identity. When a woman is clad in a white saree, she comes to be visually distinguished from the rest of the women in the fishing community, a point of difference indicating social height (Figure 8). In its careful use of color and fabric, the film continues to stress the distinction based upon caste, even within its cinematic construct, thereby inking the broader socio-cultural narrative.

4.3 Comparative Analysis: *Puthiya Theeragnal*

Almost five decades lies between *Chemmeen* (1965) and *Puthiya Theerangal* (2012), two films that map the changing interstices of class, caste, and gender among Kerala's coastal people. Both movies are set in the background of the Mukkuvar caste, traditionally described as a backward community.

Chemmeen is primarily motivated by the religious and spiritual beliefs such as the idea of Kadalamma (Mother of the Sea) punishing women who are not pure, something that has been reflective of the imposition of Brahminical patriarchal values upon an otherwise non-Vedic society. This myth places Karuthamma, the female protagonist, under the scrutiny of her community, sealing her fate in the end. Her fate is determined by patriarchal vigilantism, where female sexuality was tightly policed and was mythical.

Puthiya Theerangal, in contrast, brings more individuality and aspirations for the fisherfolk. Thamara, the protagonist, defies the constraint of women placed by a comprehensively integrated society of fishermen. Unlike Karuthamma, the passive recipient of others' decision-making, Thamara is agency personified, the symbolic rejection by society of domination over norms.

The fashion choice of the two female protagonists adds further emphasis on this shift towards gender representation. The clothing of Karuthamma in *Chemmeen* has a level of sexualization, also brought out prominently with the visual emphasis on a mole on her breast. This is compared to that of Thamara's in *Puthiya Theerangal*, which is much more modest. She is presented as the only woman among her fishing fraternity who goes out to sea with men, shattering age-old stereotypes and myths. Her attire remains reflective of her socio-cultural background—muted earth tones, long skirts even at sea, and a consistently restrained hairstyle. From a feminist perspective, Thamara’s clothing can be analyzed as a form of masculinization, subtly reinforcing the notion that for a woman to occupy traditionally male spaces, she must adopt a more androgynous appearance.

Figure 9: Thamara in *Puthiya Theerangal*

Chemmeen's impact is seen in various cinematic decisions in *Puthiya Theerangal*. The song *Manasa Maina* is sung by a character in *Puthiya Theerangal,* recalling *Chemmeen's* heritage.

Figure 10: The similarity and influence of *Chemmeen* in *Puthiya Theerangal*

A specific scene (Figure 10) also reinforces this connection—Thamara is attired in a similar fashion to Karuthamma, and her three friends resemble Pareekutty's dress. This visual analogy implies that even with the time lapse between the two movies, stories about Kerala's coastal society still carry the mark of *Chemmeen.*

In addition, the presence of various religious communities in *Puthiya Theerangal*—mainly Christian and Hindu—provides a further dimension to the debate about caste and gender. One thing that stands out is the maintenance of traditional dressing among the characters. Even under globalization and liberalization, not one of the major characters can be seen dressed in pants. The only character who appears to be dressed in jeans is being mocked (Figure 11), which suggests continued resistance to sartorial choices that are modernized, especially for women, in these coastal communities.

Figure 11: The character shown in jeans in *Puthiya Theerangal*

Whereas *Chemmeen* is a very private tragedy that focuses on individual destiny over structural inequality, *Puthiya Theerangal* joins the New Generation trend in Malayalam cinema, portraying women as more assertive and complex. The change in costume decisions between the two films marks a shift, in which fashion aspects not only determine social roles but also reflect changing attitudes towards gender and class. In their characters and storytelling, these films are culture markers of change, reflecting both the endurance of historical limitations and the increasing momentum towards increased agency for women.

Conclusion

The caste dynamics, as analyzed through the history of the Mukkuvar community and tracing its culture with the influence of the sea, allow us to insist on how such occupational structures and roles determine not an individual's but rather a community's sartorial representation.

Even though these films cannot be generalized for all Malayalam movies made on the communities of the coastal areas, they provide insights into how cinema, which reflects the social hierarchies of society, can perpetuate certain hierarchies or challenge them through visual cues. One of the most important cues being sartorial representation—the clothes, the colors, the accessories, and even facial features can impact a person's narrative on the character itself.

The caste dynamics in *Chemmeen* and the traditional aspects that still exist in *Puthiya Theerangal* illustrate how certain communities are still represented. The headwear, the *mundu* (lungi), and the *melmundu* (shawl) remain commonalities between these movies. Casteism-related scenes are deeply embedded in *Chemmeen,* whereas in *Puthiya Theerangal,* even though the protagonist is more modest and has more agency, there are still feminist lenses through which one can analyze how she has to dress in a masculine manner to occupy male-dominated spaces.

All these aspects can be inferred just by analyzing the sartorial elements present in the films. Thus, this research concludes by emphasizing that sartorial representation has played, and will continue to play, an important role both before and after liberalization.

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