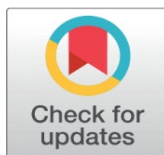
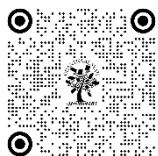


THE ROLE OF OTT PLATFORMS IN GLOBALIZING MALAYALAM FILMS

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ABSTRACT

After the emergence of OTT platforms, film industries based on the regional languages of India have become popular around the world. OTT platforms have given these smaller film industries a massive boost in terms of accessibility which has resulted in a much wider reach and acceptance for their films on a global scale. The Malayalam film industry or Mollywood is thought to have largely benefitted from this OTT boom. This paper aims to study the role of OTT platforms in the recent popularity and acceptance of Malayalam films, which otherwise would have been small-scale theatrical releases whose accessibility and acceptance would have been confined or limited within the respective small-scale regional audience who are familiar with the language.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Looking through a global perspective, the Indian film industry was always about Bollywood in general. Other regional language film industries were always overshadowed by the Bollywood film industry. Until recently, films from regional industries were only released in the respective regions where the population could perceive the language of the film. The Malayalam film industry was no exception. But, after the emergence of OTT platforms, more importantly, after the big boom in the viewership of OTT platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic, filmmakers from

regional film industries saw a new platform where they could release their films. Opting for a digital release on streaming platforms like, *Disney+ Hotstar*, Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, etc. rather than the traditional theatrical release had the advantage of reaching out to a global audience. This paper looks into some of the films from the Malayalam film industry which were released on OTT platforms and hence had a far wider reachability. The paper also aims to find the role of OTT platforms in globalizing Malayalam films and in pushing the industry towards greater heights.

2. THE INDIAN FILM INDUSTRY

The waves created by the motion picture in the West had also reached Indian shores.

No sooner had the 'Cinematograph' made its appearance in Western countries, than within a few months 'this marvel of the century', this 'wonder of the world', as it was called, made its appearance in Bombay in June-July 1896. During that period, *The Times of India* reports that the Lumiere Brothers brought out a small machine and at Watson's Hotel (now Esplanade Mansion) gave three shows daily to the public at the admission price of Re. 1. ([Shah \(1950\), p.20](#))

The Indian film industry has its beginnings with *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), by Dadasaheb Phalke which is the first Indian film. This movie made its mark on Indian cinema history and earned its producer the title of "Father of the Indian Film Industry." The Indian film industry is a collective term. It includes many industries based on the different regional languages of the country. Bollywood is the film industry which is based on Hindi films. As Hindi is the most widely spoken native language in the country, with the entire north Indian population speaking or being familiar with the language, naturally the Bollywood film industry is the most popular industry, having the widest reach. Looking from a global perspective, Indian films were all about Bollywood films for a long period of time. The Bollywood film industry ran on high budgets. So, the movies could be released in most parts of India. As Bollywood films were released in most parts of India, they became popular. Also, because most Indians understood Hindi, Bollywood films were profitable even if they were high-budget productions. These were also the films that had the most chances to be screened overseas. As a result, the global audience had the impression that Indian cinema was all about Bollywood films.

But there were other film industries producing remarkable films in India, especially in the southern parts of the country. They are namely the Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada film industries. These industries were considerably smaller, catering to a significantly smaller population. As the audience was smaller, films produced by these regional industries had lower production budgets. Films based out of regional film industries could not be screened pan India as only people belonging to specific geographical boundaries could perceive the language. Releasing regional films in movie theatres outside of the respective regions would not turn out to be profitable. So, for many years, regional films were confined to the boundaries of their respective regions. They were released, viewed, and consumed by the respective language-speaking audience. They never got any wider reach. ([Sharman \(2020\)](#))

3. THE MALAYALAM FILM INDUSTRY

Malayalam is the primary language spoken in Kerala, Southern India. The state film industry is known as the Malayalam film industry or Mollywood in popular

terms. The industry is comparatively smaller in terms of the number of theatres, viewership, and hence the production budgets for films. But the films are rich in their subjects and treatment owing to the rich art and cultural heritage of the state. The industry is also very rich in talent. *Vigathakumaran* (1928) by J.C Daniel is the first Malayalam film. The second film *Marthandavarma* produced by B.V Rao got released five years later, in 1933. Many successful landmark films such as *Jeevithanouka* (1951), *Neelakkuyil* (1954), *Newspaper Boy* (1955), *Chemmeen* (1965), etc. followed. *Chemmeen* directed by Ramu Karyat was a landmark film of the industry. It is the first film from south India to be bestowed with the prestigious Golden Lotus Award from the president for the best film. After *Chemmeen*, Malayalam film industry saw an increase in the quality of the films being produced. The 1970s saw a new film movement known as the 'New Wave Malayalam Cinema' in the industry with films like Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Swayamvaram* (1972) which brought the Malayalam film industry much acclaim. The "golden age" of Malayalam cinema is generally regarded as lasting from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Directed by master directors, films of the period had detailed screenplays, everyday stories, humour, and melancholy. The first film from the industry to screen at the Cannes International Film Festival was *Swaham* (1994), which was directed by Shaji N Karun. The industry continued to churn out excellent films later on, but the films could almost never wander out of the geographical boundaries of Kerala for mass viewership. But recently, after the arrival of OTT platforms, the film industry has had a much wider reach. Releasing movies on OTT platforms rather than movie theatres meant that films could be accessed by a global audience. It was a boon for regional film industries with restricted production budgets.

4. OTTs

OTTs or over-the-top is a form of delivery of entertainment content like films or TV shows. Before the emergence of OTT platforms, the main way of content delivery was via the traditional cable network. Cable networks used radio frequencies which were transmitted through coaxial cables or fibre optic cables during later times. The broadcast video signals were distributed by this network to areas with weak or no reception. Because the antenna is located on the top floor of the building to receive TV station signals and then transmit those signals throughout the neighbourhood using coaxial cables, the traditional cable network is also known as community antenna TV. Cable providers had their cables running around neighbourhoods and they could be connected to the subscribers' television sets to provide access to a multitude of television channels. The subscribers had to pay a monthly or yearly fee for the cable tv service. Later we came across Satellite Television Networks also known as Direct to Home (DTH). DTH connections used a dish at the top of buildings to receive signals from satellites orbiting around the earth. As the connection was directly received by the consumer unlike traditional cable networks, it had a better picture and sound quality.

Later came the OTT. OTT or over-the-top is a media streaming technology that uses the internet to stream content. It does not rely on the traditional cable network or satellites. All it requires is an internet connection. Another big advantage of OTT is that it can be consumed on a variety of devices like a television, laptop, personal computers, mobile phones, or basically any device which is connected to the internet. Some of the most popular OTT platforms include *Netflix*, *Prime Video*, *Disney+* *Hotstar*, *SonyLiv*, etc. These streaming platforms provide access to exclusive content to their subscribers. People started switching to these OTT platforms as they offered convenience. People could watch whatever they wanted to watch

whenever they desired, unlike cable tv or satellite tv in which the consumer's convenience was not a matter of concern. Moreover, in India, the internet is very affordable. 1 GB of mobile data costs only INR 18.5, which is one of the lowest prices in the world. So, the switch to OTT platforms was rather easily achievable. According to the report [KMPG & EROS NOW. \(2019\)](#), in terms of internet video consumption per capita, India ranks second globally. Also, the number of OTT players in the country has increased from just 9 in 2012 to more than 30 in 2018. Most of the young population of India has completely switched to online video streaming from cable tv networks or satellite tv as they have easy access to the internet.

5. COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE OTT BOOM

Covid-19 or the coronavirus pandemic is undoubtedly one of the greatest pandemics witnessed by mankind. According to *WHO*, as of March 2023, the global death toll of the pandemic has reached six million eight hundred eighty-seven thousand. [WHO. \(2023\)](#). The pandemic was so powerful that it brought life on earth to a standstill. The virus was spreading in uncontrollable ways at astronomical rates, and the world had to be shut down to slow it down. The Indian government had to impose a lockdown in the country which lasted almost two years. Theatres across the country were shut down as the country went into complete lockdown. During this period, people could not go outside of their homes and as a result, their only source of entertainment became the internet. As theatre releases could not be executed, filmmakers took to the OTT platforms for the showcasing of their films. People started watching films from the comfort of their homes. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a very important role in the booming of the OTT industry. Time spent on consuming OTT content began to increase multiple folds. The main reason that contributed to this was the affordable internet in the country and equally affordable subscription plans of the streaming platforms. Many global OTT platforms have cheaper subscription plans in India compared to other regions. This is due to the market here being very competitive. "The overall subscription numbers for these grew collectively from 32 million at the end of 2019 to 62 million at the end of 2020" [BrandEquity \(2021\)](#). India is currently the world's fastest-growing entertainment and media industry. [PricewaterhouseCoopers. \(n.d.-a\)](#), [PricewaterhouseCoopers. \(n.d.-b\)](#)

Indians spent 60,000 million minutes on different OTT apps in April, a 30 percent growth month-on-month. MX player saw the highest visitors at 148.4 million. India's OTT apps increased to 55 in 2020, a 4x growth in the last 4 years. [Bhutra \(2020\)](#)

6. SOME OTT RELEASES IN MALAYALAM

In the Malayalam film industry, films like *Joji*, *C U Soon*, *Drishyam 2*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Minnal Murali*, etc. were some of the most popular OTT releases during the pandemic. [Joji \(2021\)](#) is a crime drama directed by Dileesh Pothan starring one of the most popular actors in Malayalam cinema, Fahad Fasil. It was produced by Bhavana Studios. The film was one of the most popular flicks to be released on OTT. It was released exclusively on *Amazon Prime Video*. The story revolves around a young man named Joji. The youngest son of a wealthy family and an engineering dropout, Joji aspires to amass enormous money. Following an unforeseen family event, he resolves to carry out his plans, driven by avarice and reckless ambition. The film can be streamed on *Amazon Prime Video* along with subtitles in a host of international languages which include English, Tamil, Arabic,

Greek, Filipino, Malay, Português, Română, and Chinese. As the film was released on OTT, it can be accessed by people all over the world. According to the release information on *IMDB*, the film can be streamed in numerous countries including India, The United Arab Emirates, France, Singapore, Canada, The United States, and Spain.

[C U Soon \(2020\)](#) is yet another film from the Malayalam film industry starring the talented Fahad Fasil. The story and direction are by Mahesh Narayanan. The film was truly experimental in nature. The film was shot indoors, in an apartment, as a reaction to the complete nationwide lockdowns during the covid-19 pandemic. The entire movie was captured using a phone. The film is experimental in the sense that it is set in a computer screen. The story of the movie is largely told through the words and images that are displayed on computers, mobile devices, surveillance cameras, social networking sites, search engines, video calls, and virtual conversations between the main characters. Through these tools and platforms, the characters which are dispersed across the world can be found in conversation or in action. *BBC* called the film as India's 'lockdown film'. According to the report [Tilak \(2020\)](#), the film was shot in a short span of just twenty-two days, while maintaining proper social distancing during the lockdown. The film premiered on *Amazon Prime Video* in September 2020. The head of content, *Amazon Prime India*, Vijay Subramaniam is of the opinion that the film had "an outstanding response from critics and viewers and got huge appreciation in social media" [Tilak \(2020\)](#).

[Drishyam 2. \(2021\)](#) is a crime thriller and a sequel to the highly acclaimed *Drishyam* (2013) starring Mohanlal in the lead role. It was directed by Jeethu Joseph. The prequel had a theatrical release and was a huge success. It did so well that the film was remade into several other Indian languages. Therefore, deciding to go ahead with an OTT release for the sequel which was much awaited should have been a daring task. The theatre owners' association and the distributors were not in favour of the OTT release as they expected the film to bring in huge crowds to the theatres. But the filmmakers went ahead with choosing to release on OTT during the pandemic. The film was released to the public in February 2021 on the streaming giant- *Amazon Prime Video*. It can be viewed along with subtitles in English, Tamil, Telugu, Arabic, Filipino, Indonesian, Malay, Chinese, etc. Owing to the huge success of the prequel, audiences all over the country were curiously waiting for the sequel. The first part was remade and viewed in different languages, but the audience was so curious to watch the sequel that they did not wait for the sequel to be remade. Most of them chose to watch the original Malayalam version with subtitles as it was accessible across the country because it was released on OTT. This was a significant step in the globalization and acceptance of the Malayalam film industry.

[The Great Indian Kitchen \(2021\)](#) written and directed by Jeo Baby is another Malayalam film that was released on OTT during the pandemic. The film starred Suraj Venjaramood and Nimisha Sajayan in the lead roles. The story is about a woman who strives to live up to her husband and his family's expectations of her as a subservient wife. The narrative traces her development as she transforms both herself and more significantly, the family. It's safe to say that *The Great Indian Kitchen* is the most potent anti-patriarchy movie to come out in recent years, and it is worth watching. The film initially debuted on a regional streaming platform called *Neestream*. The reception to the film was very positive. Audiences as well as film critics lauded the film. Three months later, Amazon Prime Video acquired the rights of the film and began streaming from then on. [Pudipeddi \(2021\)](#)

Minnal Murali (2021) is a superhero film under the direction of Basil Joseph, starring actor Tovino Thomas. The story is about a young man who gets struck by

lightning through which he gets superpowers. He has to win against the antagonist who also was struck by the same lightning in this fight of good versus evil. A theatrical release was the original plan, but the makers went for a digital release due to the pandemic. It was released on *Netflix*. The film can be streamed in many languages including English, Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, etc. It also has subtitles for a host of different languages.

7. THE GLOBALIZATION OF MALAYALAM FILMS

Even as India stayed home during the pandemic, Malayalam films travelled across the country, and the globe. What started as a trickle in years before Covid-19 became a deluge on the back of slick subtitling, faster internet speed and multiple streaming services. People who had not even heard of cinema from Kerala a few years back now crown it as the most forward thinking and rooted industry in the country. [Kumar \(2022\)](#)

In fact, this period of the industry may be called the ‘pandemic wave of films.’ About the popularity of OTT platforms, the renowned director from the Telugu film industry, S.S Rajamouli had said that OTT had already gained popularity before COVID, However, COVID gave it a boost, and Malayalam films made the most out of this. Malayalam films were previously only known to a small audience, but after COVID Telugus even in small towns became lovers of Malayalam stars, he noted [The Federal. \(2021b\)](#). In an article by *The Wire*, which lists the top ten Indian movies released on OTT platforms in 2021, Malayalam films include *Kala*, *Drishyam 2*, and *The Great Indian Kitchen*. *Drishyam 2* also takes a spot in a list published by IMDB, titled ‘Best of 2021: The Top 10 Most Popular Indian Movies’. In *Film Companion’s* picks of the top 15 films of 2021, seven of them are Malayalam films, including *Drishyam 2*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Kala*, *Minnal Murali*, *Aaarkkariyam*, *Naayattu* and *Malik*. According to an article by Roopa Raveendran in *The Naked Truth*, filmmakers and writers have gained uncommon creative freedom thanks to OTT services. Now, they are free to create scenarios, characters, and narratives that may interest a larger and more accepting audience. Language is no longer an obstacle. Lines have become blurry. Viewers are no longer viewing films through a linguistic prism. [Thakur \(2021\)](#)

One could say that regional cinema like Malayalam cinema has really benefitted from the OTT revolution that taps into niches that are left unattended by big-budget studios and production houses. The changing appetites of the audiences, thanks to the OTT platforms, have certainly helped in raising the accessibility of Malayalam movies. And this accessibility has certainly raised the visibility of Malayalam movies.

The rise of Netflix, Prime Video, and other online entertainment services has encouraged Pakistani audiences and writers to explore Indian regional cinema outside of Bollywood. An article in the Pakistani English language newspaper named *Dawn*, finds that a “noteworthy aspect of Malayalam cinema is the representation of their Muslim and Catholic communities” [Siddique \(2020\)](#). The article states that Malayalam cinema is secular compared to Bollywood films, which the Pakistani audience had earlier exposure to. The Pakistani author stated that Malayalam films give new perspectives on regional Indian cinema as well as to various concepts and people of India thanks to growing internet availability and streaming platforms that provide both high-quality video and subtitles. [Ved & South Asia Monitor. \(2020\)](#). Mohan Kumar from the lifestyle magazine *Mans World India* in an article titled ‘How Malayalam Cinema Caught the Popular Imagination’ writes that his Punjabi wife is

fascinated with the realistic craftsmanship and progressive narratives of Malayalam cinema.

My wife is one amongst the expanding bandwagon of non-Malayali audiences who've discovered the new wave of Malayalam films, which have been made accessible through OTT platforms and subtitles. Today, in elite film circles of Mumbai, Malayalam film names that most critics struggle to pronounce, seem to be topics of cocktail chats, and intellectual banter. It wasn't always like that. [Kumar & Mans World. \(2021\)](#)

The New Yorker, an American weekly magazine has reviewed the Malayalam film *Joji*. The review says that *Joji* is "a movie that integrates the pandemic gracefully and intelligently into its story" [Brody \(2021\)](#). *The Great Indian Kitchen* was chosen for the Shanghai International Film Festival and the prestigious UK Asian Film Festival. [The Great Indian Kitchen. \(2021\)](#).

The director of the film, Jeo Baby told *The Federal*, "Yes, our film has been picked for two important festivals... I am glad that our film is reaching newer people" [The Federal. \(2021a\)](#). *The Guardian* which is based in the United Kingdom recommends the Malayalam film *Kumbalangi Nights* as one of the hidden gems that are available to stream. According to the article [Handoo \(2021\)](#) by *Zee News India*, *Minnal Murali* was trending at position four on the global Top ten list for non-English films on Netflix in just its first week of release! This superhero movie is also among the top 10 movies on Netflix in eleven other countries, including India, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, where it is ranked number one. The latest Malayalam film titled *Iratta* (2023), starring Joju George in a double role is currently trending on *Netflix*. According to the report by [News 18. \(2023\)](#), since its March 3 debut on *Netflix*, the movie has climbed to the top of the charts in numerous nations. *Iratta* is still ranked in the top two on Netflix in India, third on the platform in Sri Lanka, fourth in Bangladesh, seventh in Singapore, eighth in Mali, and tenth in Malaysia. For Malayalam cinema, this is a matter of pride.

8. CONCLUSION

Even when everything became stagnant during the pandemic, Malayalam films were on a tour across the globe, courtesy of polished subtitling, quicker internet, and numerous streaming services. The films discussed, along with many others which were released during and after the Covid-19 pandemic on OTT streaming platforms have been successful in breaking the geographical boundaries of the Malayalam-speaking state. Films like these have also broken language barriers inside the country and around the world with the help of the global accessibility and reach provided by streaming platforms. These Malayalam films discussed above are all highly acclaimed by non-Malayali and global audiences and critics, which otherwise would have been small-scale theatrical releases whose accessibility and acceptance would have been confined or limited. Therefore, it can be said that the OTT streaming platforms have played a significant role in the recent global reach and popularity of the Malayalam film industry, thereby globalizing Malayalam films.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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