

## The Portrayal of *Musliyors* in Malayalam Cinema; Representation and Visibility of Muslims in Post Babari Demolition Era

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**How to cite this article:** N.S Abdul Hameed (2024) The Portrayal of *Musliyors* in Malayalam Cinema; Representation and Visibility of Muslims in Post Babari Demolition Era. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 7867-7879.

### ABSTRACT

This research intends to look at the portrayal of *Musliyors* (Muslim religious scholars) in Malayalam Cinema, particularly focusing on films produced in the aftermath of the Babari Masjid demolition in 1992. The demolition of the Babari Masjid and the political events around it deeply influenced the representation of Muslims in popular culture in India. Indian society started experiencing communal-cultural disruptions in public spaces in a similar way to the post-9/11 world. This research investigates the representation and visibility of *Musliyors* to understand how popular culture has mediated the perceptions of these religious figures in the broader context of everyday life.

This paper looks at how religiosity and religious figures are depicted in Malayalam cinema to create political binaries like good Muslims and bad Muslims. The paper will underscore how stereotypes, prejudices, and misinformation about Muslims were carried out in Malayalam cinema by using distorted Muslim clergy figures. Thus, the study explores how popular culture, here the cinematic narrative, reinforces or deconstructs the visual imageries about Muslims and their religious figures, signs, and identities during a period marked with communal polarisations and complex socio-political climate in India. It may contribute a different understanding of the broader discourses of mediation of everyday life through the visual narratives, critically engaging with the visual representations of religious figures.

**Keywords:** Musliyar, Malayalam Cinema, Religious Representation, Cinematic Narratives, Popular Culture and Religion, Babari Masjid demolition

### Introduction

Cinema stands out among other mass media with its unique ability to push the message to the popular imagination of audiences and to create an impact on their opinion formation (Sanjeev Kumar, 2013). Even though the textuality of cinema can be read differently from the different perspectives, as a popular culture its process is to originate a 'collective experience.' Across all cultures, the mass media, especially cinema and electronic media emerged as the most powerful tool to emanate this process. Films are not 'unconscious' or 'non-deliberate actions' of filmmakers, rather they convey the political ideology, agenda, and perception of those who produce them, own them, and control the economic sphere they are produced to since they are powerful tools to '(re) shape, (re) structure and (re) construct' the realities that are openly reachable (Eijaz, 2018).

With the political shifts and changes in the power equations, India witnessed a deeply polarized social structure in the society from the 1990s. The rise of extreme Hindutva in the political arena in late 1980 and their march to power in 1999 and 2014 positioned religious nationalism at the forefront of socio-political discourses. The Ram Janmabhumi movement<sup>1</sup> by Sangh Parivar in the late 1980s and early 1990s changed the course of India's decades-long pluralistic societal appeals to a monolithic cultural appearance as a national interest. The astonishing visibility of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political figure of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the demolition of Babari Masjid in 1992 as an aftermath of Ram Janmabhumi movement by RSS led Sangh Parivar and other Hindutva outfits marked the beginning of a new political discourse in India<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> In 1980s, Vishva Hindu Parishad launched *Ram Janmabhumi movement* which later supported by Bharatiya Janata Party. The movement became aggressively popular among Hindu nationalists with the *Rath Yatra* of then BJP President L.K Advani allegedly a political tactic to overcome the threats of *Mandal Commission* by then Prime Minister V.P Singh which may affect the electoral prospectuses of BJP. On the recommendations of commission, the Singh government had announced 27% OBC (Other Backward Caste) reservation that will potentially rally the OBC voters behind parties championed the reservation move and slogans of social justice. The acceleration of *Ram Janmabhumi* movement with the *Rath Yatra* helped BJP to create an alternative political narrative based on anti-Muslim sentiments to consolidate the Hindu electorates. Historian, Ramachandra Guha stated that the *Yatra* was 'religious, allusive, militant, masculine and anti-Muslim.'

<sup>2</sup> BJP kept raising the Babari-Ram Mandir issue in the election races since 1984 and after the demolition of Babari Masjid in 1992, the continued promising to build a temple for Ram where Masjid was razed down. In 2019, on 9<sup>th</sup> November, the apex

In India, as a post-colonial state, the media used to be recognized as a tool in the hands of the state to propagate nationalism, scientific temper, and progressive socialization principles. But in the late 1980s, the state-owned media platforms had already convened programmes that endorsed religious nationalism by broadcasting 'national epics' (Rajagopal, 1994). The Indian public sphere, popular culture, and policies of government were highly influenced by several events that struck the secular fabric of India. The communal riots, Bombay blasts, privatisation, and political instability in the mid-1990s gathered enough visibility to the alternative political movement which is the Hindutva rise that promised the revival of Hinduism through political empowerment.

The political revival of Hinduism that Sangh Parivar proposed was an invention of aggressive masculine Hindutva that easily found a necessary enemy to construct the consent of the Hindu majority, that is Muslims. Sangh Parivar brought back the religion into the very core of politics and redefined nationalism on the 'cultural memory' (Kumar, 2014) of Hinduism. The repeated exhibition of Hindu symbols including rituals and the removal or forceful invisibility of other religious symbols became the process of it. This was evident in popular culture too. Cinema particularly carried this and enabled the Muslim 'other' who can be lethal or threat or terrorist, or at least marginalized on the condition of unconditional submission. The stereotypical representation of Muslims in cinema became more evident in the Post Babari demolition era and this was the scene in Malayalam films too.

Even though Kerala is said to be free from extreme Hindutva politics based on electoral mandates<sup>3</sup>, the Malayalam films have a textuality similar to Bollywood considering the representation of Muslims. The stereotypes that Indian films produced and circulated about Muslims are either the misrepresentation of religious symbols or the absence of actual presentation of them. This article tries to look at the representation of Muslim characters focusing on the representation of *Musliyar* (a detailed discussion follows) in Malayalam cinema. I try to argue that even those who recognize the misrepresentation of Muslims in popular culture don't see the inappropriate representation of certain religious symbols, identities, and religiosity of Muslims/Islam in cinema.

#### **Demolition of Babari Masjid and the Muslim 'other'**

The demolition of a four-hundred-year-old Babari Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh by hardcore Hindutva extremists on 6th December 1992 changed the fate of the Indian subcontinent. The communal division reached its peak by the early 1990s and the incident put the political conscience of the country in an unprecedented dilemma since then. The Ram Janmabhumi movement by VHP and Sangh Parivar volunteers ensured the deep polarization on a communal basis through their nationwide Rath Yaras. It culminated in the Karseva and the demolition of the Muslim prayer site. AG Noorani writes:

Frenzied Rama temple karsevaks in thousands on Sunday overran the security forces and demolished the disputed shrine here prompting the center to swiftly dismiss the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Uttar Pradesh and bring the state under president's rule. According to hospital authorities in Ayodhya, four persons were killed and hundreds injured when the domes of the structure caved in. By 5 pm it was all over; nothing existed of the structure except a mass of debris. The kar sevaks stormed the site after closing in from all sides exactly 25 minutes before the proposed kar seva on the acquired 2.77-acre land was to begin. The demolition of the disputed structure was carried out in full view of senior RSS-BJP-VHP leaders, including Lal Krishna Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi.

While addressing the nation through Doordarshan on 7th December 1992, the then Prime Minister, P.V Narasimha Rao said that the demolition incident was a grave threat to the ideals, principles, and institutions of India's constitutional structure. While the demolition of Babari Masjid endorsed the far right-wing politics in India, constitutional values like Secularism were put into the oven of a sad reality of the existential crisis of the largest minority section of the country- Muslims. The then-ruling party- the Indian National Congress promised to rebuild the demolished masjid. But the congress party couldn't reinstate the trust of their loyal vote bank while far right-wing political parties and organizations unearthed an emotion of Hindu consolidation. The senior BJP leader and later the Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated that the "masjid (Babari) was a symbol of shame and it has been erased." Another BJP leader who later became a cabinet minister, Dr. Murali Manohar Joshi wrote to UNI, a press agency:

It has brought 'Hindutva' to the center stage. The BJP has become the voice of resurgent nationalism. It is redefining

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court in the country ordered the Government of India to form a trust to build a temple for Ram on the disputed land. On 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2024, Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, dedicated the temple to the Hindu believers across the world. And the event was turned into a political gala by Hindu nationalists aiming the General Elections in 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Kerala's electoral politics, which is based on bipolar tussle between Congress led UDF and Communist Party of India Marxist led LDF, has not given any chance to the far-right political front to govern the state so far. The only BJP member elected till the date to the state legislative assembly was O. Rajagopal in 2016 from Nemom, Thiruvananthapuram. At the same time, an increase has been registered in their vote share in consecutive elections to the parliament while they faced a decrease in the vote share in the Assembly election from 14.96% in 2016 to 12.41% in 2021.

the political ideology of every aspect of national life, be it secularism, socialism, foreign policy, or economic issues. The Hindutva concept is going to be the deciding factor. All the political parties are going to be affected by this. This would lead to the creation of a new India. This would unite the society and caste conflicts would come to an end.

Dr. Joshi confidently says that whatever the Congress do or undo, Rama has come to be associated with the Hindutva movement. The event redefined all the aspects of Indian lives. Even Though religiosity was a close factor in Indian political thought from the very beginning of the national movement against British colonialism, the Babri demolition put religion at the center of political policies in the country. The 'victory' of far right-wing politics made sure the narrative of the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy falls in place. The demolition of the Masjid was followed by a series of riots in many parts of the country. Riots in Bombay alone had taken 900 lives and caused property damage of 9000 crores.

The outrage of Muslims, over the 'betrayal' that they had to face, led to aggressive protests mainly in North India. Hindus and Muslims attacked each other in Surat, Ahmedabad, Bombay, Delhi, Kanpur, and Bhopal in which around 2000 people were killed, mainly Muslims. The 'resurgent nationalism' that Hindutva proposed, planned and executed the sidelining of Muslim demography and othering took place everywhere. The Bombay blasts in 1993 which are considered as a terrorist response to the Babari demolition and ensuing riots in the city, added flavors to the far-right narratives about Muslims.

The division between Hindus and Muslims was not an immediate aftermath of the Babari demolition. The communal perceptions of history and colonial endorsement of communal polarisations had readied the ground. It is a reality that formed eventually with the British colonial policies of 'divide and rule' for decades. From the mobilisations of the national movement on the eve of the Bengal partition in 1905, religion and communalism became a part of the popular political narrative. In the 1920s, far-right Hindu groups proposed social divisions with geographical implications which are believed to have led to the partition<sup>4</sup> of the Indian subcontinent. The partition was never a solution for them as India remained a socialist, democratic republic with secular values.

Many incidents strengthened the far right-wing political forces in post-colonial India among them the strongest reason was the Ram Janmabhumi movement. The narrative set for this was the birthplace of lord Ram and the ancient temple over there was desecrated and destroyed by a Muslim invader, Babar who is the founder of the Mughal dynasty. Throughout the movement, RSS-BJP-VHP and other organizations made sure of a majoritarian consolidation against the Muslims. Distraction from the caste-oriented difference among Hindus and bringing them under a vast Hindu identity was the only possible solution that RSS sought and found for fulfilling their political ambition. By the Ram Janmabhumi movement and Rath Yathras, RSS and BJP convened it by posting an enemy- who is an outsider or an invader (Ahmad, 2014), a Muslim being.

Stereotypes about Muslims and their lifestyles were spread in society. The images and icons of Islam and Muslims were demonized. The portrayal of Muslims in media, TV, and films substantiated the far right-wing narratives on a large scale. Media were used to tell the people what to think about by setting the agenda (McCombs et al., 2014) through the attribution of certain representations to certain identities. Sensitive issues to Hindu communities like Ram mandir, were presented and propagated as a 'national honor' where Muslims are positioned on the opposite side.

Apart from the interior reasons for Muslims' miseries, the 9/11 chapter deeply influenced Indian society too. The global war against terrorism that America and NATO members carried out on countries with Muslims as the majority population purposefully terrorized or demonized Muslims with 'divergent, confused and negative representations' (Eijaz, 2018) everywhere. The clash of civilisations was interpreted as the clash between peacekeepers and Muslim 'other.' In the post-Babari Indian politics, especially after the return of secular parties to power by defeating Vajpeyi's BJP government in 2004, the desperate far-right parties and organisations channelled the fear and phobia created by the relentless construction image of 'Muslim terrorist' around 9/11 (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016) to Indian mentality.

### **Muslims in India and cinema**

Since the partition, Muslims in India have faced numerous challenges in socio-political parameters. Sachar Commission (2006)

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<sup>4</sup> The partition of Indian Subcontinent in to two nations, India, and Pakistan, occurred after long political debates and actions between Hindu-Muslim nationalists during the anti-colonial freedom struggle. Since the Bengal partition in 1905, the Hindu-Muslim divide became evident in the political discourse in the subcontinent where Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha led the Muslim and Hindu nationalist ideologies respectively. Hindu Mahasabha leader V.D Savarkar's Hindutva ideology had carried the earlier thought of two nation theory in 1920s. In the 19<sup>th</sup> session of Hindu Mahasabha in Ahmedabad, Savarkar reaffirmed that there are two nations in India- Hindus and Muslims. In 1940, in the Lahore session of Muslim League, Muhammed Ali Jinnah explained the need for a two-nation prospect. An idea of homeland for Muslims was shared in a pamphlet, titled 'now or never', distributed by Choudhary Rahmat Ali in 1933 in which the title Pakistan is believed to have used for first time.

points towards the living conditions of most of the Muslims in the country: "The Community (Muslim) exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development." The perceptions about Muslims in India have hugely affected the overall development of Muslims, the largest minority in India known as one of the largest democracies in the world. In the report, Sachar observes that Muslims carry a double burden of being stamped as 'anti-national' and as being 'appeased' at the same time.

While Muslims need to prove on a daily basis that they are not "anti-national" and "terrorists", it is not recognized that the alleged "appeasement" has not resulted in the desired level of socio-economic development of the Community. In general, Muslims complained that they are constantly looked upon with a great degree of suspicion not only by certain sections of society but also by public institutions and governance structures. This has a depressing effect on their psyche.

The Sachar committee was constituted by the UPA government in 2004 to analyse the living conditions of the largest minority in India- Muslims. This report showed that apart from the tragedies, trauma, and brandings with negative tags, Muslims are way too backwards and with unattended miseries. The "Muslim appeasement" was a political tool that the BJP used against Congress to picture the secular party as anti-Hindu. While that worked for the BJP and they managed to mobilize majoritarian vote shares in favour of their attempts for power, this narrative put Muslims under the shadow of the secular complex of the Congress party resulting in negligence and invisibility from the political leadership.

Representation in cinematic context cannot be limited to the portrayal of an identity, it is also reaching out of the screens to the imaginaries of viewers. Films play a crucial role in determining when and how to evoke certain narratives depending on what themes are selected, what and how issues are highlighted, which signifier and symbol are used to represent, how the observations are framed, what attributions are associated with the subjects and how the content is shown (Eijaz, 2018). Compared to other mass media, Cinema has a unique capacity to define cultural identity, to mark nationhood (Rajgopal, 2011), and to manipulate narratives with its plenty of cinematic techniques and possibilities.

In Bombay cinema, Muslims undergo stereotyping (Bhaskar & Allen, 2009). Representation of Muslims, in Hindi cinema, become marginal characters with the stereotypical image of Muslims (Khatun, 2016). The Indian culture that Hindi cinema produced is a monolithic culture where 'other' representations like Muslims come with certain cultural symbols that actually may not be associated with Indian Muslims like the Turkish cap, Palestinian Keffiyeh, etc. If Muslims are the central protagonists, then they are 'represented as exotic beings' such as aristocrats, Nawabs, and Kings or extremely- frustrated villains such as terrorists, underworld thugs, and anti-nationals. Nadira Khatun brings across the work of Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arab: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), and argues that the absence of typical and relatable characters and repeated portrayals of negative images perpetuates the stereotypes existing in Hollywood.

The stereotypes about Muslims leave the historical facts behind and most of them are the result of a longer process that distinguishes certain identities from the majoritarian logic (Amin, 2004). The stereotypes produced and propagated through popular culture are concrete images. They keep impacting public opinion, perceptions, and public policies. Spandan Bhattacharya and Anugyan Nag (2016) write:

"Once entrenched, these stereotypes tend to perpetuate through generations and create public opinion at large. The media is not simply a 'mirror' of society but plays a much more complicated role as a purveyor of social messages. In a highly fractured and divided society with a long history of communal strife and discord such as India, the perpetuation of stereotypes is dangerous. In this context, a case in point is the continuing stereotyping and racial profiling of Muslims through television in the Western world."

The rise of the BJP under Narendra Modi's leadership to power (2014) and their landmark victories in various states and the General election of 2019 assisted Sangh Parivar in gathering a stronger 'dictating power' that they managed to enjoy after the demolition of Babari Masjid. This has been very evident in both the most influential entertainers among North Indian masses- Hindi cinema and Cricket. In the cinema industry, Sangh Parivar organisations and other Hindutva fringe elements continuously made ban threats<sup>5</sup> against certain actors and filmmakers. The boycott campaign against Shah Rukh Khan's

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<sup>5</sup> The Boycott campaign against Amir Khan's *Forest Gump* remake *Lal Singh Chaddha* (Chandan, Advait. 2022) affected the film severely leaving it as a flop in the box office. The social media campaigns mainly targeted one of the biggest actor/producer of Bollywood for his earlier movie *PK* (Hirani, Rajkumar. 2014) that offended Hindu nationalists allegedly for insulting Hindu gods. Amir Khan's meeting with Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and first lady Emine Erdogan in 2020 also was used in the boycott campaign against Mr. Khan. Apart from these reasons fuelled the boycott campaign even before the release of movie, some scenes in the movie also dragged negative impression for extended and aggressive campaign against the movie after it release also like Amir Khan's character is seen helping a Pakistani soldier during the war that offended patriotic narratives of far right wing outfits.

*Pathaan* (Anand, 2023) was one of the largest of its kind. Even though the film became one of the biggest blockbusters in the history of Bollywood, such campaigns especially on Social Media have shown the depth of polarization and hate that these far-right wing enabled around cinema. It may be Shah Rukh Khan, the factor that the Hindutva fringe has a problem with. But the reason they found to instigate the boycott campaign was the color of the heroine's (Deepika Padukone) bikini in a song sequence in the film. Deepika, a Hindu actress who plays a Muslim character that too a Pakistani spy in the film, dances with Shah Rukh Khan, a Muslim actor, putting on a bikini of saffron colour, a shade that can be easily associated with Hinduism became an 'attempt to hurt Hindu sentiments.'

The national movement in post-colonial India, mostly influenced by Nehruvin thoughts, had promoted perspectives of communal harmony, and national integration on scientific temper through various media platforms. All India Radio and Doordarshan continued to promote a vision of a progressive India where the wounds of partition would be healed. Cinema was a tool to propagate nationalism in a post-colonial state (Rajgopal, 2011). But the crucial shifts in the political history of this country such as the emergency (1975), the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1984), the Shabano Case and Sharee'ath controversy (1985), the Mandal Commission (1989), Ram Janmabhumi movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the privatization drive of the economy changed the popular narratives in the country. The national integration projects that were motivated by progressive nationalism were substituted by the majoritarian appeasement projects that eventually fuelled religious nationalism. Doordarshan telecasted *Ramayana* (Sagar, 1987) and *Mahabharata* (B. R. Chopra, 1988) helped the Ram Janmabhumi movement (Rajagopal, 1994) of Sangh Parivar to enable a narrative of the revival of Hinduism. Apart from the programmes on National Television, the cinema industry was also influenced by these political changes.

The products of popular culture in India added to the far-right narrative of Hinduism as the Indian Culture. The monolithic images of Indian culture in Hindi cinema and other popular cultures deny the pluralism that India possesses. They catered to the Hindutva ideology of India as a Hindu Rashtra. These 'certain essences of "Indianness"' (Rajgopal, 2011) put Muslims outside the mainstream cultural paradigm and substantiated the image of 'other' and 'invader'. Nadira Khatun (2016) argues that "if there is a need to represent Hindu culture and tradition as a national culture, it is obvious that the 'Others' would be represented as either less or differently."

We can see rituals and puja according to the Hindu religion at the commencement of the production of a film. It doesn't change according to the religion of actors, directors, or even producers. It is the 'Indian culture' according to the public sphere. This ousting of other religions and their symbols is evident almost everywhere in Indian society. It is quite 'normal' for such Pujas and rituals even during the commissioning of trains, military aircrafts, and other government machinery. It is not new to Indian society. In Indian public culture, where there are full of religious signs, the interaction between visual culture, religion, and performance is active (Dwyer, 2006). Religiosity is often simply translated as Hindu religion in India. What is new is that such rituals are done by people in constitutional posts, celebrated, and given the most visibility these days.

The representation of Hinduism as a national religion, Hindu rituals and lifestyle as the national culture, and Hindus as the true patriot sets a parameter of films of national integration. *Bombay* (Ratnam, 1995) and *Kashmiri Files* (Agnihotri, 2022) won the Golden Lotus accolade of national film awards for best film for national integration. While *Bombay* was caught in the controversy over the removal of certain dialogues on the demands of Hindutva leader Bal Thackeray, the *Kashmiri Files* caused huge controversies over the portrayal of Kashmiri Muslims, mis-presentation of data, and manipulated narratives of atrocities against Kashmiri Pandits in the valley. Besides the criticisms about the film and concerns over the polarization caused by the film, union ministers and other senior political leaders of BJP and other Sangh Parivar organizations promoted the movie.

There are several films produced as patriotic films in which a Hindu hero saves India from a Muslim villain. The juxtaposition of Muslim-terrorist-security threat-Pakistan in Hindi films made Muslim representation in Indian society much more problematic. War films and spy thrillers produced in various film industries in India facilitated this Hindu-Indian and Muslim-Pakistan division on screen and passed to the audiences. *Border* (Dutta, 1997), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (Sharma, 2001), *Mission Kashmir* (V. V. Chopra, 2000), *Keerthi Chakra* (M. Ravi, 2006) *Kurukshetra* (M. Ravi, 2008) were such films and most of these were huge successes in respective box offices. The sequel to *Gadar*, *Gadar 2* (Sharma, 2023) became one of the most-grossing films in the history of Bollywood. Both the films were prompted widely by the BJP leaders and Sangh Parivar outfits.

These "terroristic films" provided much enough to substantiate the Sangh Parivar narratives that establish Muslims as the 'Other' (Khatun, 2016). Political Connotations of such films propagate the idea of Muslims as a security threat and eternal enemy and some films such as *Kashmiri Files* and *The Kerala Story* (Sen, 2023) problematically portray Muslims as the enemy within, conspirators against the nation and a threat to the Hindu religion. The *Kerala Story* is a controversial film that caused

enough debates over its misrepresentation of Kerala, Muslims in the state, manipulated social plot, misleading data<sup>6</sup>, and problematic narratives. The film is about the life of a Hindu girl who is subjected to religious conversion and recruitment for a terrorist outfit abroad (ISIS). The girl is from a very religious family background and she is 'betrayed' by her Muslim friends and her Muslim boyfriend. The film passes a dangerous portrayal of Muslim girls in professional colleges. These two films have gone to the extent that they did not even want to deploy a 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim' dichotomy anymore. The Kerala Story says that even the nicest Muslim friend (whether that friend is a girl or boy) also can be a threat to Hindu girls (for their religion and their nation). It, in this way, is alarming to see that the extremist Hindutva ideology succeeds in 'manufacturing consent' (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) to enable a Hindu theocratic apartheid in India where minorities will be marginalised, otherised, and treated as secondary citizens.

### Muslim Representation on Malayalam Silver Screen

Swathy Lekshmi Vikram (2020) observes that the rise of Hindutva influenced the Malayalam film industry in the 1990s and it resulted in the misrepresentation of Muslims. The Hindutva feeling of superiority was reflected in many 'heroic' characters that faced off against Muslim villains. 'Antagonism towards Muslims' (Vikram, 2020) was an element that many of the films served to cater to the resurgent self-pride of Hindutva conscience in the audience. Narasimha Mannadiyar in *Dhruvam* (Joshiy, 1993), played by Mammooty, is a higher-class Hindu man with all masculine and Hindutva 'charm' living in a parallel authority with self-proclaimed guardianship of his sympathizers and subjects and takes revenge on Hyder Marakkur (Tiger Prabhakar), who put on all the Muslim symbols, for his sins including the murder of Mannadiyar's brother. S.N. Swamy, the screenwriter, and Joshiy, the director, made sure that the representation of Hindu-Hero and Muslim-Villain falls in place that satisfies the Hindutva imaginary.

The Good Muslim, Bad Muslim (Mamdani, 2002) dichotomy has always been there in the Malayalam cinema. It is very difficult to spot an appropriately represented traditional Muslim character on a Malayalam silver screen. On-screen, 'Good Muslims' who are on the side of Hero will drink alcohol, put on gold chains, be without a beard, will be off with Muslim traditional dressing styles like Hijab, Purdah, etc., will be in an inter-religious marriage, evidently Modernised and so. A Muslim who subscribes to the cultural-social and political interests and notions of the mainstream is eligible to be portrayed as 'Good Muslims.'

*FIR* (Kailas, 1999) starring Suresh Gopi as Muhammed Sarkar is a thriller that caters to the Good Muslim, Bad Muslim binary throughout the movies. Muhammed Sarkar is an IPS officer on an investigation of a murder of a journalist who exposed a political patriarch and Hawala tycoon Rahim Haji (Narendra Prasad). Haji denotes the Muslim political leadership in all his appearances and acquaintances and is shown as a hawala dealer who got killed by his rival Narendra Shetty (Rajeev). Muhammed Sarkar had to deal with the power lust, ignorant and fundamental Muslim politicians during the initial stage of investigation so that this Muslim character could reach out to the Hindu villain. At one point, Muhammed Sarkar shouts at a Muslim politician called Kunjalavi: "I am a bloody Muslim, Indian Muslim, Hindu Muslim, Hindustan Muslim who converted mind and religion generations ago, who will not blast a bomb on others and sees all humans as humans, a real Muslim." His encounters with these Muslim characters, who are portrayed with maximum Muslim symbols, and his religious identity of a modern, progressive, and patriot Muslim, whose wife is seen without head scarfs or traditional Muslim attires, make him capable of facing off against the villain, Narendra Shetty who is highly sophisticated, charming and powerful. At the same time, Zakir Ali Husain (Mohanalal) in *Praja* (Joshiy, 2001) has no such limitation that Muhammed Sarkar has. Zakir Husain, a former underworld don in Mumbai who gave up a life of violence and chose philanthropy takes revenge on Hindu villains who put on Hindutva icons named Ram Naik (Mahesh Anand), Balraman (Shammi Thilakan), DD (Vijayaraghavan), a Christian IPS officer called Joseph Madachery (Baburaj) and a Christian politician called Lahel Vakkachan (N.F Varghese). The opening shot of the film is framed with a pan shot over the famous Haji Ali Dargah in Mumbai and Azan is the background score. It further shows the good deeds of a Muslim community leader, Haji Musthafa who is called Bappu (Anupam Kher). *Praja* is the only Malayalam film of this kind having an unconventional representation of the portrayal of Hero-Villain imaginaries and can be put up as an opposite to the *Dhruvam* in this regard.

Vikram (2020) opines that until the 1980s, the Muslim characters in Malayalam films enjoyed appropriate representations. And it is Hindutva's rise and accompanying social consciousness that changed the Muslim representation in the Malayalam cinema. But I would not see that the rise of Hindutva politics alone caused the misrepresentation of Muslims in the Malayalam

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<sup>6</sup> The Government in West Bengal had banned the release of *Kerala Story* stating which was later stayed by the Supreme Court of India. The official press note of the state government stated that the ban is to maintain the peace in the state considering some of the scenes showing in the movie may affect the order and peace in the state. While staying this decision of Bengal government, the Supreme Court also directed the film makers to ensure a disclaimer to convey that the movie is a 'fictional' production as the producer acknowledged to the court that the data claimed in the movie is not substantiated authentically. In the early stages of promotion, the film makers claimed that 32,000 women from Hindu and Christian communities were converted to Islam and many of them joined ISIS later.

cinema. It is a part of 'cultural memory' (Kumar, 2014) that is rooted in the colonial ethnographic images of Muslims. The reports of the British colonial regime repeatedly described 'fanatical, anti-social and un-progressive.' Some authors and European scholars had picked up the same judgment and wrote about Muslims in Malabar as 'ignorant, devoid of bigotry, rabid kind, fierce and bloodthirsty' (Miller, 1976).

Mahmood Kooria, (2011) brings E.V Ramakrishnan's literary critics to point out how the mainstream framed Muslim representations inside certain stereotypes. The Savarna or upper middle class consciousness limited the mainstream narratives neglecting the Muslim discourses available in public. Malayalam Cinema and literature sidelined the actual Muslim representations and portrayed a Good Muslim image parallel to the un-progressive fanatic image of an 'other' Muslim. "Bombs are easily available in Malappuram" is a dialogue by the hero, Jagannathan (Mohanlal) in *Aaram Thampuran* (Kailas, 1997). This dialogue is the wholesome expression that Malayalam Popular Culture and many Malayalees in South Kerala imagined about Malappuram, the only district in the state where Muslims are the majority.

There is a slight shift seen in the Malayalam cinema about the portrayal of Muslims after the Gujarat riots (Vikaram, 2020). However, the existing stereotypes are still in circulation except for recent attempts by a group of filmmakers for appropriate portrayals of Muslims and Malabar. The conflict of Muslim identity in India was explicitly portrayed in *Anwar* (Neerad, 2010) which also holds the confusion of Muslim representation and dichotomy of Good Muslim and Bad Muslim. There are two villains in this movie. One is Babu Sait (Lal) a community leader turned terrorist who caused the tragedy of losing all family members of hero Anwar (Prithviraj). The second villain is the society that treats Muslims as 'other' and secondary citizens. But the latter is described through Babu Sait and gone 'corrected' or 'unpunished.' Babu Sait asks Anwar: "Are all Muslims terrorists?" Anwar answered, "Not to my knowledge." But the film repeats the Hindutva phrase saying "All Muslims are not terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims." Because in the film too, all Muslims are not terrorists but all the terrorists in the movie are Muslims. Few movies attempted to address the dilemma and crisis of Muslim identity that Babu Sait talked about in *Anwar*. The character called Hyder (Ashiq Abu) in *Annayum Rasoolum* (R. Ravi, 2013) asks the police who fabricated an inappropriate report that denied his passport that "for people, we are goons. for police, we (Muslims) are terrorists. Don't we also need to survive?"

It is not because of the absence of Muslims in front and behind the camera in Malayalam cinema, the stereotypical representation takes place. There are Muslim actors, writers, directors, and producers who are considered influential in the industry. I recognize two reasons caused the absence of actual representation of traditional Muslim lives in the Malayalam cinema. One is the distance that traditional Muslims kept from popular cultures and mass media like cinema. For their religious reasons, *Ulema*, the religious scholars, discouraged cinema and issued fatwas against it in many instances. Another reason is the distance that the mainstream had maintained from the traditional Muslims.

Malayalam Cinema continues to carry the stereotypes about Muslims and feeds into the already perceived imagination of spectators and hence it is reaffirmed even if it is outdated or unreal. Along with the problematic imaginaries about Muslims, Malayalam cinema facilitates the invisibility of actual Muslim lives and proper picturisation of their religious characters such as *Musliyar*, traditional Muslim rituals, etc.

#### ***Musliyar* figure, attire, and the visual imagery**

It is often said that the word *Musliyar* is *Muslih* (The one who shows the righteous path) with *yaar* (beloved) and initially affiliated to a knowledge tradition of Makhdums<sup>7</sup> which was headquartered in Ponnani (Now in Malappuram). *Musliyar* is one such title representing the *Ulema* (Singular: *alim*), the scholarly leadership of the Muslim community. In this study, *Musliyar* is used as a common word for *Ulema*. The religious life of Muslims in Kerala, particularly of Sunni Muslims, evolved with the engagements of *Musliyars*. Ponnani was the most prominent centre for religious studies (Miller, 1976). In the tradition of the *Ulema* in Kerala, the knowledge system is rooted in the Makhdums. The religious law, *fiqh* or jurisprudence, of Muslims in Kerala is systematically explained in *Fath'hul Mu'een* which is written by Zainudhin Makhdum Saghir. The Makhdum legacy is known for its influence on religious life, political stand, and social structure of Malabar. The educational pedagogy in the Ponnani system was known as '*Vilakkathirikkuka*' (Sitting around the light). Most of the *Musliyars* were trained under it until the Ponnani-style Dars facilities were adopted in many other parts of Kerala. *Musliyar* or *Ulema* played a huge role in the overall development of the vast majority of Muslims in Kerala.

But the dichotomy of 'reformists and traditionalists' which is often employed on Mujahid and Sunni respectively by various scholars shadowed the representation of Sunni *Ulema* in the public sphere. Sunni *Ulema* or *Musliyar* had to face the challenge

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<sup>7</sup> The training system of Makhdums in Islamic knowledge tradition is said to be established in twelfth century or earlier and reached the peak during the leadership of Sheikh Zain ud Din bi Sheikh Ali (1467-1521) and during the period of his grandson and author of famous text in Islamic jurisprudence- *Fath'hul Mueen*, Sheikh Zain ud Din bin Sheikh Muhammed Gazzali or known as Makhdum Saghir. See Rolland Miller 'Mappilia Muslims of Kerala, A Study in Islamic Trends' 1977. pp 260, 261.

of being associated with the policies and practices deemed 'backward' and 'unmodern' (Visakh et al., 2021). While reformists are considered the modern Muslims and part of the 'progressive' Malayali, Sunni Muslims are stereotyped with the orthodoxy and their traditionality was stamped as 'anti-modern.' Yet they lead the Sunni Muslims with the 'highly vibrant, dynamic and organizational articulation' (Visakh et al., 2021).

Eventually, with the relentless engagements of scholarly leadership such as Kanathapuram A.P Abubaker Musliyar<sup>8</sup> with distinctively defined modernity, Sunni Muslims and the *Ulema* started gaining attention in the public sphere. Their organizational strength, political and social bargaining in electoral contexts, and educational and philanthropic movements convened conversations between Sunni and others in Kerala's public sphere. Yet the visibility of *Musliyar* is not regular there and the negligence or misrepresentation of *Musliyar* or *Ulema* in Popular culture, especially cinema, can be recognised as the continuation of the problematic portrayal of Muslims.

When cinema misrepresents a strong religious symbol or idea of a particular community, the impact would be heavier on them. Abida Eijaz (2018) opines that cinema is capable of creating a common worldview among the spectators towards religion through inaccessible entities and realities. In a society where people lack opportunities to mingle and have direct interaction with diverse cultures and ethnicities, the absence of first-hand knowledge and repeated icons that signified negative perceptions will widen the divisions in the society. The shots of *azan*, the minaret that succeeds in the sequences of explosions or terrorist activities can be seen in many western films. Excessive projection of Islamic symbols, and dress codes while portraying negative characters can be seen in Malayalam films too. The portrayal of some Muslim characters in *FIR*, who also denotes the Muslim political leadership in Kerala, along with all the religious symbols is an example of this. And some other movies depict Muslims as completely remote from the realities such as *Pranayanaavu* (Vinayan, 1999), *Udayapuram Sultan* (J. Thomas, 1999), *Mylanji Monjulla Veedu* (B. Thomas, 2014) and *Fukri* (Siddique, 2017). These movies can be tabled as in the comedy genre, and most of the characters seem to be developed only to repeat the stereotypes and to mock the everyday practices and social lives of Muslims.

Considering the importance of the *Musliyar* image among Muslims, the portrayal of this religious icon on film screen will be connected straight to the core of Islam. Although there are some appropriately presented characters, *Musliyar* figures in Malayalam cinema are often portrayed as disturbingly unprogressive, illogical and a laughing stock. The Mollakka (Sasi Kalinga) in *Mylanji Monjulla Veedu* is a character that embodies many stereotypical images about Muslims and *Musliyar*. His initial appearance itself is mocked with his looks and his talking style. He practices polygamy and he is abnormally passionate about food. He appears, wearing a white shirt, dhoti and turban denoting the traditional dressing style of *Musliyar*, in the Ayurveda resort of Doctor Madhavan Kutty (Jayaram) demanding immediate consultation with the doctor. When the receptionist asks him about the appointment he shows a letter from the Health Minister who is from his party as he claims (expressing his community spirit). He wanted to consult the doctor for his twisted neck which was an attack from one of his wives for the reason that he had gifted something to his another wife.

Madrassa *Muallims* (Tutor in Madrassa) are quite often displayed as immature and unprogressive. These Madrassa *Muallims* have a crucial role in the religious lives of Muslims in Kerala. There are around 20,000 Madrassas in Kerala under various Muslim organizations. Madrassas are always attacked by far-right extremists and Madrassa *Muallimeen* (tutors; *Muallim* (sing.)) have been facing constant hate campaigns from them. Here, the portrayal of them on the silver screen shall be cautious but unfortunately, the Malayalam cinema represented them in a way that caters to the Hindutva extremist narratives. The Madrassa *Muallim* in *Vaanku* (Prakash, 2021) is represented differently in his appearance as he wears white clothes and a turban but without a beard. He is a furious tutor to smaller kids who hold a stick and scares them with that. He also is portrayed as a typical Muslim embodying the patriarchy who warns a female student about becoming a 'firewood in hell' for her wish to recite *Azan* (Call for prayer). Male supremacy is regularly linked with the Muslim faith by the 'image-makers' (Shaheen, 2009). With bulging eyes, a hardened voice and a pointing stick in the hand, he says to the girl that Allah has kept aside this duty (performing *azan*) just for men and desiring it is a devilish thought. The film has other *Musliyar* figures and among them, one accuses the girl (Raziya) who wanted to recite *azan* played by Anawasara Rajan as a '*Haram piranna Pennu*' (girl, born out of adultery), a slur that is colloquially seen among Muslims in Kerala.

Mammukkoya played a character called Kammukutty *Mollakka* (Colloquial version Mulla that means the tutor) in *Gazal* (Kamal, 1993) who is portrayed as someone who eats a lot even during his tuition period in the *Othupalli* (a predecessor setup of Madrassa). Mammukkoya also played a character called Koya who is an Arabic teacher who does not know Arabic in *Doore*

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<sup>8</sup> Sheikh Abubakr Ahmed, popularly known as Kanthapuram A.P Abubakar Musliyar, is the 10<sup>th</sup> Grand Mufti of India and long serving General Secretary of All India Sunni Jam'iyyathul Ulema. He is regarded as one of the stalwart Muslim leader known for his stands against religious extremism. His revival movement focusing on educational empowerment of Muslim community called Markazu Saqfathi Sunniya headquartered in Calicut is known for its combined curriculum of religious-material and technical streams together.



*Doore Oru Koodu Koottam* (Malayil, 1986). These characters are made as comedy characters based on their appearance in both movies. The characters played by Salim Kumar in *Perumazhakkalam* (Kamal, 2004) and in *Meow* (Jose, 2021), Aamu Elappa and Usthad respectively, repeat the stereotypes of *Musliyar* figures as 'big eaters.' While the latter is a real *Musliyar* the former is shown with the attire of one. Aamu Elappa is an annoying character mocked as having an eating disorder and being miserably pessimist in this deep emotional drama film. This *Musliyar* dress code has been widely used in Malayalam cinema to portray the 'unprogressive', patriarchal and rigid Muslim religious images. But Bappu Haji Musthafa (Anupam Kher) in *Praja*, Salim Bhai (N.F Varghese) in *Onnaman* (Kannanthanam, 2002), Valiyakath Moosa (Mohanlal) in *Paradeshi* (Kunjumammed, 2006), Ahmed Sahib (Innocent) in *Ali Bhai* (Kailas, 2007) Kareemkka (Thikakan) in *Usthad Hotel* (Rasheed, 2012) are some of the very few portrayals represented differently with *Musliyar* appearances.

In *Sudani from Nigeria* (Mohammed, 2018), the image of *Musliyar* is portrayed differently from what Malayalam cinema has been showing. This *Musliyar* takes part in a ceremonial prayer on the occasion of the demise of the mother of Sudani aka Samuel who is a Christian. The film has also an aesthetically beautiful portrayal of students who are trained to be *Musliyar* in traditional palli dars. This movie was widely praised for its different portrayal of Malappuram in the Malayalam film industry. *Sudani from Nigeria*, and *KL 10 Patthu* (Perari, 2015) have a different Muslim women picture from what Malayalam cinema usually shows. For Malayalam cinema imagination, Muslim women, especially from Malabar, were the mere subjects of the Muslim patriarchal system. They are voiceless or oppressed or veiled. But *Sudani from Nigeria* shows a girl who enjoys the agency to refuse a proposal from a boy for the reason that he is less educated. In *KL 10 Patthu*, *Halal Love Story* (Mohammed, 2021), *Thallumaala* (Rahman, 2022) and *Sulaikha Manzil* (Hamza, 2023), we see many Muslim women who are opinionated, politically conscious and enjoying their agency in their lives.

The *Musliyar* in *Sulaikha Manzil* (Hamza, 2023) asks Sameer (Chemban Vinod Jose) to get the approval of his sister Haala Parvin (Anarkali Marikkar) on the occasion of her *Nikah*. It is a *Musliyar* with all the symbols of traditionality of Muslims in Malabar that reminds about the choice of a girl in her marriage. "Did you ask your sister whether she agreed to this *Nikah*? Ask her louder" says the *Musliyar* on diaz of *Nikah*. It breaks the stereotypical notion about Muslim patriarchy that is often ascribed to the *Musliyar* figure and Muslim women.

*Adaminte Makan Abu* (Ahmed, 2011) is one of the noble cinematic productions in the Malayalam film industry. Abu (Salim Kumar) is a character that Malayalee audiences have never known before in cinema. He is quite different from the 'imaginary' Muslim (Sutkute, 2020) that Malayalam cinema produced before. He is an attar (perfume) seller with a very humble life along with his wife Ayishumma (Zerina Wahab) who wants to go for a Hajj pilgrimage. The movie shows his struggle to manage the preparations for his only desire which is pilgrimage amid his financial challenges. The movie shows a Muslim as "a human who never disturbed or cheated any other being in this world" if it is described in the words of the character played by Nedumudi Venu. The film beautifully portrays the Islamic concepts of environment and human relations. This film can be considered as the closest portrayal of Kerala Sunni Muslim lives that are very much dependent upon Sufistic traditions in the religion. The character called *Usthad* in the movie represents the mystic-sufi concept of Islam and is described as well connected to the larger Muslim audience. The Movie talks about the "balance of people here" (Hyder's (Played by Suraj Venjaramood) dialogue) around the *Karamath*, *Vilayath* and *Isthiqasa* which are important terminologies where traditional Sunni Muslims and Modernist Mujahid groups come into conflict. Traditional Sunni Muslims were accused as 'closed' and 'superstitious' according to the 'reformist' stream in Muslim society (Visakh et al., 2021) and it influenced the mainstream perception of traditional Muslims. The characters in *Adaminte Makan Abu* exhibit respect and praise for the *Karamath* of *Usthad* and 'his special relationship with Allah'. A conversation scene, set in a cinematographically ornate dusk (with impressions of magical realism) in which Abu approaches lonely sitting *Usthad*, brings the philosophy of worries. *Usthad* asks, "If you have many sorrows, how much sorrow would I, whom people are calling and praying, have?"

Kunjikkoya *Musliyar* in *Daiva Namathil* (Jayaraj, 2005) is a character who practices *Pinjanamezhutthu* and other traditional rituals that Sunni Muslims do and he is portrayed as subtle, logical and moderate on political stands. He is seen as encouraging the *Zakath* and discouraging any aggressive responses of Muslims to the demolition of Babari Masjid. But this movie, written by Aryadan Shoukath, possesses many problematic representations of Muslim youth, Aligarh Muslim University, conservative Muslim lives and the *Ulema* of the community. *Usthad* in *Kilichundan Mampazham* (Priyadarshan, 2003) is also portrayed as just and logical whereas the film is filled with stereotypes about Muslims on their idea of marriage and family. The character named Moosakka (Salim Kumar) in *Malik* (Narayanan, 2021) is powerful in *Musliyar*'s figure which is depicted as subtle, humane and moderate. This character can be seen rejecting all the communal divisions amidst the sensitive plot of the film which tells the story of communal tensions in Ramadapalli, a southern coastal village in Kerala. The *Usthad*'s monologues in *Pareeth Pandari* (Elliyas, 2017), a film set on poor Muslim lives struggling with the financial challenges of marriages, presses the responsibility of tragedy and miseries of Muslim women suffering from the repercussions due to the dowry system on religious organizations. *Usthad* in Crescent *Yatheem Khana* (orphanage) says that Muslim organizations shall work to end the dowry system instead of toiling to decrease the age of marriage. While the message is shown as progressive, the information

passed through is factually incorrect as Muslim organizations are actively working on philanthropic activities including helping poor families on marriages.

Mappila dress code has been given a very wrongful connotation in Malayalam cinema. While the burqa-clad women, the cap and surma (Kohl for the eyes) wearing man, the ghetto next to a Mosque and so are the clichéd imagery of Muslim lives and characters that Indian audiences experience in Bollywood films (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016), The dhoti, green belt, *Eranadan* Slang signified the Muslim identity with all possible stereotypes (Vikram, 2020). The *Eranadan* style of speaking is often mislocated without considering its geographical relation of it.

Cinema has this unique ability to feed the eyes and minds of the audience with an idea, a message and a narrative through the icons, symbols and cinematic placements of subjects. The audience is instantaneously convinced by the binaries of perception through the 'distinguishable visual signifiers' in the cinema (Kumar, 2014). Thus the attire of characters plays an important role in the representation. While Modernity, which evolved in Kerala society and changed the dressing style, attire and appearances, was only visible on Hindu bodies, Muslim portrayals stick to the unprogressive symbols. The Hindu characters were represented within the regular urban setting often with sophisticated attire of western modernity; the Muslim representation remained in the dominant discourse that required some indexicality to show Muslim-ness on screen (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016). The dialectical binaries and the cinematic idioms that reflect socio-political and cultural relations are part of the significant visual perception of the viewer (Kumar, 2014).

The dhoti, green belt and sleeveless banian signified the ignorant Muslim while the *Musliyar* figure often represented the patriarchal Muslim authority and both are partialised and mocked. Sometimes, this already-established imagery of Muslim attire in cinema becomes a liability for the filmmakers. There is a scene in *Daivanamathil* in which a group of Muslims sitting possibly in a Masjid and conspiring against the heroine, Bhavana's Sameera. They are extremists who are very intolerant of the writings of Sameera. These Muslims are *Musliyar* figures which is ironic considering the moderate political stands of *Ulema* in Kerala. But to signify the identity, the filmmaker uses the most evident religious attire and religious place. Towards the end of the movie, Sameera who refuses to wear Purdah and who is opinionated and educated criticize the *Ulema* as the sympathizers of extremism in the society.

When it comes to the terrorist images, the Malayalam cinema imagery seems to have looked at Bollywood style. Hyder Marakkar (*Dhruvam*) wears pathani kurta which is not familiar in Kerala society. The cinematic appeal tries to bring the parallel Muslim context with the villains we see in Bollywood films. It tries to draw a relation between the Muslims that Malayalee usually know with other Muslims who are already demonized that too with the stereotypical images of Kurta, Kefiyah, Topi, Burqa and so on. Eventually, the collective consciousness of Malayalee audiences requires such visual signifiers to connect the villain on the screen with the imagined villain in their minds.

The representation of this particular dressing style tries to establish a memory that equalizes the image of terrorism with a certain cultural identity. Babu Sait in *Anwar* and Angoor Ravuthar (Jayasurya) in *Iyyobinte Pusthakam* (Neerad, 2014) add the Muslim-ness of Malayali's imagined villain. War dramas in the Malayalam film industry such as *Sainyam* (Joshiy, 1994), *Keerthi Chakra*, *Kurukshetra* and *Kandahar* (M. Ravi, 2010) imitated the visual vocabulary that Bollywood uses to portray the terrorists. If it is about a Muslim hero, the 'good Muslim' impression which is necessary for the reception of a Muslim hero such as drinking alcohol, putting on gold chains (Mohanlal's characters in *Praja* and *Alibhai*) and absence of all evident Muslim religious symbols will be affixed.

### Conclusion

The representation of Muslims and their religious symbols in Malayalam cinema has considerable shifts over time. The political events that influenced the Indian mainstream also affected the portrayal of Muslims in Malayalam cinema. Cinema is influenced by society and it also influences society back. The portrayal can be the reflection of political discourse in the society but that eventually creates and maintains a visual imagery about the represented along with the dominant narratives of the political discourse that took place. The rise of Hindutva in the late 1980s and early 1990s enabled a religious nationalism that engulfed the popular narratives in the country. The demolition of Babari Masjid and communal polarisation had destroyed the Nehruvian principles of National integration. The Hindutva created and maintained a Muslim 'other' to form the consent as per the majoritarian logic. The division that sidelined and demonised the Muslims reflected in the representation of Indian cinema. The visual perception emanated by Cinema influences the audience with its 'capacity to define the cultural identity and nationhood' (Rajgopal, 2011). For the Malayalee audience, cinema is the most influencing popular culture and it forms the public opinion of mainstream vehemently.

The stereotypes about Muslims are created by the repeated representations of inappropriate images and the absence of appropriate and real pictures. Traditional Muslim lives including their religious symbols are made invisible on Malayalam

silverscreen while the attire, language and appearance of Muslims in the Malayalam cinema kept feeding the Hindutva narratives. The agency of Muslim women was denied and the Muslim lifestyles related to the social institutions like marriage and family were mocked. The colonial ethnographic idea about Muslims and their religious character continued influencing the public sphere of Kerala and the mainstream that was dominated by *Savarna* and upper-middle-class Hindutva denied the visibility of traditional Muslims. While a minority of Muslims with the tags of 'modern', and 'reformist' were facilitated the visibility as the mainstream, the representation of the vast majority of Muslims was disabled. The methodology of 'western enlightenment thinking' (Visakh et al., 2021) in understanding the reforms and revivals among Muslims, neglected the revival activities of traditional Muslims. The mainstream subscription of this possibly missed the nuances of religious sensibilities and sensitivities of Muslims.

Malayalam cinema still has not portrayed the real picture of *Musliyar* and their socio-political engagements in society. The imaginary Muslim community that excludes the contributions of these 'Turband Professionals' (Visakh et al., 2021) is making the actual picture of Muslim religious leadership invisible. The Muslim community in Kerala has registered a remarkable development in almost all sectors. The Gulf migration, capital accumulation, educational movements and organizational strengths have restructured Muslim lives. In this progress, the Ulema, and Musliyar classes have played a huge role that anchored the community transformation. But popular narratives have yet to accept this reality. Instead of exploring these, the visual perception is tangled with the established stereotypes about the identity and religiosity of Muslims in cinema. The misrepresentation of a particular identity, which is politically suppressed, in popular culture will affect the everyday lives in a society. When it is the religious symbols that are misrepresented in a society, which is divided as per religious nationalism, the impact will be heavier and alarming.

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