

The Many Lives of Kayamkulam Kochunni: Masculinity and History in Post-Liberalisation Period Films

Tony Sebastian

Introduction

Historical studies of masculinity typically use two approaches. The first accepts masculinity as a positive category that is amenable to analysis, and which is seen to have a determining influence on the lives and experiences of men. The second analyses it as a gender expression of great variation that generate a multiplicity of masculinities.^[1] Both these approaches recognise the value of each other in historical study and use methods that fit their respective objects of study. The former favours emphasising the lived experiences of men to arrive at a history of the social and political life of men and uses empirical evidence drawn from the lives of the masculine subject. The latter, which has had consistent conversations with the emergent cultural theory of the 1990s emphasises the intersection of the subject's masculinity with other markers of identity that co-constitute it and uses cultural texts like art, films, literary texts and so on. While the positivist faith in masculinity of traditional historical studies is unacceptable for those working within a post-structuralist framework—who deem the emphasis placed on the mutability of masculine roles or performances over a period of time is not a liberating experience but a reification of essential transhistorical masculine identity—traditional historical studies view the analyses of representations in cultural texts as a 'study of norms and stereotypes.'^[2] In this context, the goal of this short paper is to move away from either paradigm to propose a method to use masculinity as an historiographic tool that may be deployed to produce a gendered history of men, and identify how their experiences are gendered without reifying masculinity as a positive category or reducing masculinity to a means of producing a broad cultural history. Admittedly, the paper is more inclined towards the cultural historical framework in its use of literary and film iterations of Kayamkulam Kochunni—a Muslim man who lived in the erstwhile Hindu princely state of Travancore. However, the choice of texts and method is intended not as much as a representational study of Kochunni's masculinity as an exemplification of the method and its felicity for historical exploration of masculinity in the Global South where evidence like personal correspondence may not be forthcoming. The larger question guiding this method is whether the use of history as a means of subversion, through histories of masculinities or countercultures, can achieve the intended political consequence of challenging contemporary formations of masculinity.

Rather than laying claim to a history of masculinity that is continuous, the paper takes note of Pierre Bourdieu's view that masculinity is dehistoricised and eternalised within particular spatio-temporal locations.^[3] In his elaboration of the operational logic of masculine domination, Bourdieu arrives at a 'sexualised cosmology that is rooted in a sexualised topology of the social body' where what is deemed masculine is not essentially so but is circulated as such through its emplacement within the sexualised topology of the social body.^[4] Following Bourdieu's argument, the paper then does not attempt an historical account of masculinity, but instead accounts for the mechanism that dehistoricises and eternalises what is deemed masculine. In this, the paper relies on Joseph Campana's view of masculinity as distributed 'between disparate and sometimes seemingly arbitrary actors and objects.'^[5] Campana views 'masculinity not as essence or identity, social construction or performative iteration, but as connectivity.'^[6] Using this formulation of masculinity, the paper analyses gendered assemblage within

particular spatio-temporal locations that generate textual iterations of masculinity. Historical analyses of cultural texts allow a reconstruction of these dehistoricised and eternalised historical masculine assemblages, not merely to make a case against the atemporality of masculinity or even as a subversive manoeuvre, but to historicise contemporary masculine assemblages and to relate the logic of domination that inducts and circulates gendered phenomena without fear of reifying an essentialist view of the category of masculinity. The multiple iterations of the story of Kochunni present an opportunity to historicise masculine assemblages across a span of more than a century. The first and only written source of Kochunni's deeds is Kottarathil Sankunni's *Aithihyamala* (Garland of legends) which was first published in 1909.^[7] Sankunni's narrative of Kochunni's life and acts form the source of several later iterations. The first iteration of the Kochunni story in the film medium appeared in 1966. A sequel to the film called *Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan* (Son of Kayamkulam Kochunni) appeared in 1976. Two long running tele-serials have also appeared in Malayalam television since the 2000s borrowing the titles of the two films. However, the latest iteration of the Kayamkulam Kochunni story was in the form of a big-budget period drama released in 2018. The iterations of the story of Kayamkulam Kochunni present the opportunity to examine the narratives as both historical narratives and literary history. Hans Harder identifies the triad of language, literature and nation as the organising principles of modern literary historiography.^[8] The paper foregrounds the interrelationship of the triad with historical masculine subjectivities and analyses the processes of 'rediscovering, unchaining, and realigning' that mark each iteration of the story of Kochunni.^[9] This paper analyses the different iterations of the story of Kochunni to make two arguments. The first is in relation to the post-liberalisation period film and the onscreen representation of aggressive masculinity. The paper emphasises the iteration of Kochunni as embodying a nationalist, aggressive masculinity in 2018 film. The paper makes this argument in the larger context of post-liberalisation period films and identifies the emergence of a masculine nationalist hero who is marked by martial prowess, compliance to a reimagined caste order and agonistic relationships with the coloniser in post-liberalisation Malayalam film. Second, it identifies that caste and masculinity relate differently in different iterations, thus providing evidence for the mutable relation of caste and masculinity within different historical masculine assemblages.

Kayamkulam Kochunni in *Aithihyamala*

There aren't many who haven't heard about Kayamkulam Kochunni in Travancore or in Kerala. Most people know him as thief and a bandit. In reality, he was also a sincere and honourable man. Some may wonder how one person can embody these contradictory qualities. You will see how this happened through the events to follow.^[10]

Thus, begins the story of Kayamkulam Kochunni—a dacoit^[11] from the eponymous region of Kayamkulam in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore. *Aithihyamala* records that he was born near Keerikkadu in Kartikapalli taluk in the year 1818 and that he was the son of a local thief. In Sankunni's narrative, Kochunni runs away from home due to poverty and finds his way to a Brahmin who feeds him and arranges for him to work in a shop as the shopkeeper's aide. Kochunni spends almost ten years in the shop where he proves himself to be a diligent and sincere hand. The visit of a prominent martial arts teacher to Kayamkulam marks the beginning of a period of transition in Kochunni's life. He requests the teacher to admit him as a pupil. The teacher rejects his request fearing that he will follow his father's footsteps and become a thief. However, an undeterred Kochunni hides in a tree and learns all the moves, and when caught, astounds the teacher by defeating his own pupils. The teacher is pleased with Kochunni's dedication and proceeds to formally train him. Kochunni learns magical arts in addition to martial arts from the teacher. However, the self-same mastery of martial arts costs him his job at the shop as the shopkeeper no longer feels safe around this trained warrior. Although he resorts to smuggling and banditry, Sankunni reports that Kochunni did not harm 'the poor, the honourable, and the law-abiding, and would only rob the rich and the evil men who would not even give drinking water to the needy.'^[12] The antagonists in Sankunni's story are clear: it is the rich and the miserly. Sankunni reports that Kochunni demands a certain sum of money or a share of the crop from the rich. He would only

plunder them if they refused to meet his demands. Sankunni writes:

The riches that Kochunni thus plundered were not just enjoyed by him and his comrades. He gave away a lot from his own share. He did not think to keep anything that he gained. He had no thought beyond enjoying each day. Gradually all his poor friends grew richer ... There are several poor men who became rich and several rich men who became poor thanks to him.^[13]

Sankunni describes Kochunni as a tall, broad, bold and athletic man whose physical strength was only made more dangerous by his martial arts training and intelligence. He chronicles several incidents from Kochunni's life where his intelligence and quick wit aids his life as a wanted dacoit. However, Sankunni's narrative is unapologetic about the violent and coercive nature of Kochunni. To Sankunni, the fact that he helped the needy forms only one aspect of his personality. Indeed, Sankunni presents Kochunni as a consummate rowdy who is given to drink, women and violence. He makes no effort to hide that Kochunni is a philanderer who has affairs with several women across the region. Sankunni reports that Kochunni killed his mother-in-law in a fit of rage for confronting him about a long affair with a Shudra woman. He drowned her body in a lake.^[14] Although he had long evaded the law, he is imprisoned only when he was betrayed by a Shudra woman with whom he was having an affair. However, he breaks out of the jail to kill the woman and her new Shudra lover. Sankunni also reports that Kochunni did extort money from the poor. However, he adds that if Kochunni did extort money from the poor, it was always returned along with an additional sum for the trouble that he caused.^[15] In terms of violence, dacoity and rowdiness, the only discount that Sankunni allows Kochunni is that he was relatively better than the members of his gang—who were indiscriminate on whom they inflicted their attention. He is finally captured after being betrayed by his one of his own comrades. According to Sankunni, Kochunni died in prison at the age of 41 years, after spending 18 years as a bandit and outlaw.

Sankunni does not dwell upon Kochunni's good deeds or consider them as a reason for his popularity. Rather, Kochunni is commended for his intelligence and skill that allows him to make his escape despite extorting the rich and miserly. Sankunni paints Kochunni as an outlier of the society who was successful in challenging the rich and miserly who represented the vice of institutionalised greed. If the narrative hails Kochunni as a heroic figure, it does so only because he provides a subversive pleasure as one who tortures the rich Nairs who embody moral corruption and vice in the narrative.^[16] However, it is notable that Kochunni's violence is directed exclusively at rich and miserly Nairs and never against the Brahmin. Indeed, Kochunni's redeeming virtue lies in the fact that he is obsequious toward Malayala Brahmins. The story of Kochunni teems with episodes where Brahmins are portrayed with an aura of magnanimity, kindness and even prowess in martial arts.^[17] This is hardly surprising since most of the stories in *Aithihyamala*—which justify its publication as 'a means to impart worldly wisdom and morals'—features famed Malayala Brahmins as protagonists.^[18] Thus, in Sankunni's narrative, Kochunni's story becomes a backdrop in which the nobility and distinction of Brahmins is contrasted with the greed and avarice of rich Nairs. Sankunni narrates incidents where Kochunni quells the pride and punishes the greed of rich and miserly Nairs through his magical and martial art skills. In contrast, the self-same Kochunni is stupefied by the unflinching courage and skills of Brahmin men. He is also seen as helping or being helped Brahmins.^[19] Sankunni thus resolves the moral contradiction that Kochunni embodies by representing him as a flawed hero who serves the twin purpose of preserving the caste and moral supremacy of the Brahmin while simultaneously acting as a force of good against the vice of greed and avarice.

***Kayamkulam Kochunni* (1966)**

The 1966 film, *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, was an onscreen adaptation of a successful play by Jagathy N. Achary, who also wrote the screenplay for the film.^[20] The film portrays Kochunni as an egalitarian, secular hero, and magnifies the aspect of his character as a helper of the poor. Achary's 1966 iteration

presents a hero who is activated through and within a reconfigured masculine assemblage in the newly formed state of Kerala. Unlike Sankunni's iteration, which uses Kochunni's childhood hardships as a means to justify his disillusionment with society and his subsequent rowdiness, the film re-purposes it to establish a trait of an inherent sense of equality within him. For instance, the very first sequence of the film shows Kochunni as a child fighting with rich children in his neighbourhood for a mango which he then gives to a young girl from a poor family while taunting the rich for their greed. The narrative unequivocally establishes that Kochunni's actions as a thief were motivated by his view that 'when one person heaps coins upon coins, nine others die of hunger,' and his self-image as an agent and instrument of enforcing the law of equality.^[21] Throughout the film we see and hear Kochunni reiterating the idea that he is committed to protecting the poor and punishing the rich and greedy. This is nowhere more pronounced when Khader, a suruma-seller, accuses him of being a selfish thief. As a response to this accusation he takes Khader to the fields in the backdrop of a song. The song plays while the montage of workers engaged in all forms of agricultural labour. The lyrics says thus:

The creator created man/man created the rich
The rich created poor all over the world/and laughed at them as they were poor
An erudite thought that can improve the world/is coming as a wave through every junction
One who feeds gruel to a hungry stomach/is a messenger of God
One who is illiterate may not be erudite/but if he has a giving hand
He is a dear son of Allah/and the palace in heaven is for him.^[22]

As the song ends, Khader apologises to Kochunni and accepts that he is a good man. The lyrics of the song give proof to the conviction of Kochunni's egalitarian view of society. The script pitches the character of Kochunni as a champion of the people and as an instrument of equality. The presence and advocacy of the communist party, which had already made its presence strongly felt in the state since its formation, was a definitive influence on this iteration of the Kochunni story. The ideal of economic equality that Kochunni espouses was already being put into practice by the communist party through a series of Land Reform Acts. I argue that the popularity of the 1966 film strengthened the left parties in the 1967 elections, and gave them the cultural sanction and political will to continue the historic land reform bills or agrarian reform bills which redistributed the land of the upper castes.

The nexus of the corrupt and greedy rich men and the princely state and its authorities like the Tehsildar, form the primary antagonists of the 1966 film. Although it was produced in the throes of major socio-political and economic change, the 1966 film does not name the landowning castes as the target of its criticism. Instead, it makes inequality a condition of humanity thus displacing or invisibilising the role of caste in generating it. Kochunni embodies the communist view that the feudal society can be addressed through economic inequality and that caste is a mere cultural superstructure.^[23] The question of caste inequality and its relation to the plight of the worker is replaced by the view of a class-based society where the worker is denied their rightful share in the wealth.

In addition to his role as an instrument of economic redistribution, the film also reconfigures Kochunni's identity in relation to women by planting it within the familial and the domestic economies. We see a host of prominent characters like Kochunni's family, composed of his sister and wife—the mention of whom is either absent or marginal in Sankunni's narrative. He is portrayed as the doting elder brother, and although initially unfaithful, a dutiful husband who makes amends with his wife. The emplacement and circulation of Kochunni's masculinity and its relation with women also takes another posturing in its encounter with a lecherous feudal lord who seeks to force himself upon young women who have come of age—a plot invention of the 1966 film. The moral indignation of Kochunni is alien to Sankunni's Kochunni and is only activated within the reconfigured masculine assemblage. The familial relations and guardianship of the virtue of women makes Kochunni incomparable to Sankunni's hedonist Kochunni. Perhaps the only similarity in this strain between the Kochunni in the 1966 film and Sankunni's Kochunni is the affair he has with a lecherous woman. To Sankunni she is an unnamed Shudra woman who

betrays Kochunni and who thus performs the narrative function to impart the moral lesson that lecherous women are untrustworthy. However, the narrative function of the lecherous Shudra woman is revised and developed by the 1966 film. After she betrays him, Kochunni escapes from prison to find the woman in the company of a new lover. Unlike Sankunni's narrative, where her betrayal imparts a moral lesson about the deceitfulness of lecherous women, the 1966 film christens her as Vazhappilli Janaki and considers her as a named threat to the order of the society and the family. The murder scene of Janaki is particularly revealing as, in addition to reiterating the casteist trope of lower-caste women as inherently loose and immoral, we also see the double standard in the treatment of men's and women's sexuality. Kochunni lets the male lover go back to his wife and confronts Janaki and assumes the role of judge and executioner on behalf of the moral public. Before stabbing Janaki, he enumerates her crimes: she has destroyed numerous families; several women killed themselves because she stole their husbands; she has lead several men astray with toddy and arrack.^[24] As he stabs her, he declares that he is saving innumerable families by killing her. Her murder is an action that is justified within the reconfigured masculine assemblage where disciplining the sexuality of women in the public sphere becomes the central concern of masculinity in the reconfigured mid-twentieth century socio-political and familial structure of Kerala.^[25]

The murder of Janaki—which becomes a pivotal point in this narrative as an act of disciplining women's sexuality—does not derive its legitimacy by virtue of any essential masculine principle but simply by an emplacement within the reconfigured masculine assemblage. In contrast to Sankunni's narrative, where Kochunni is undeterred in killing several people including his mother-in-law, the only murder Kochunni commits is that of Vazhappilli Janaki, and for which he promptly and voluntarily surrenders himself before the Tehsildar. The masculine assemblage that activates Kochunni's masculinity permits repentance for the act of murder but simultaneously legitimates it. The violent death of Janaki at Kochunni's hands, an act that is imminently justified through and within the reconfigured masculine assemblage, gives proof to the cultural sanction that men enjoy to control women's bodies and sexuality in the context of the post-independence presence of women in the public sphere. The paradox Kochunni embodies—both as a lawbreaker and as a law-abiding citizen—is negotiated and made sensible through his agency as a man who regulates the sexuality of women.

The film transforms Kochunni from a hedonistic anti-establishment figure to a moralistic leader of the masses. The final scenes of the film show crowds of people crying out at the Diwan's house for Kochunni's release. It is tempting to examine Kochunni as a 'social bandit' in the 1966 film.^[26] Indeed, Hobsbawm's formulation of social bandits as individuals who are 'considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported' remains valid in the construction of Kochunni's identity in the film.^[27] Reading the film within the historical context of the newly formed state of Kerala in the 1960s is imperative as the motivations and actions of Kochunni are closely tied to the socio-political changes of the region rather than the Indian nation. The trope of the social bandit 'forced into crime by a feudal system which the law is unable to smash,' thus does not hold purchase as Kochunni remains an optimist and advocate for the state.^[28] As the film draws to a close, Kochunni is seen delivering a speech to the crowd that cheers for him. He addresses them saying:

I have made mistakes when I tried to help you and the government. But, one who makes mistakes must also face the consequences. So, my last words to you is that you should try to help and save the land and the government without making mistakes.^[29]

Kochunni is transformed into a martyr for the cause of masculine domination in this iteration. Kochunni's endorsement of the state allows the film to advocate economic equality while simultaneously relegating the question of the caste inequality of the feudal state to the background. The 1966 film set the template for later iterations of the story of Kayamkulam Kochunni as a figure who earned his merit by his moral virtue—a morality that is activated through and within a masculine assemblage that derives its force from

the right of men to regulate the sexuality of women.

Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan (1976)

Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan (Son of Kayamkulam Kochunni), released as a sequel to the 1966 film, concretises the iteration of nineteenth-century folk hero Kochunni as a proto-Marxist.^[30] *Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan* opens with stills of the 1966 film accompanied by a voice over narration that both establishes continuity with its prequel and explicitly identifies Kochunni as an ancestor of the communist movement in Kerala:

Kochunni was an immortal man; a maverick who tried to impose an unwritten ideology. He was a nightmare to those who made their wealth through unfair means; a benefactor of the wretched and destitute. He began an unsophisticated endeavour to bring about economic redistribution in the land, and destroyed everything that stood against it. Whenever the good suffered, he rushed to their aid. Once, and only once did Kochunni's dagger see blood—to end the curse on the society caused by the deeds of an immoral woman.^[31]

The 'immortality' of Kochunni is a strong indicator of the reconfigured masculine assemblage. Words like *pratyayashastram* or ideology, *sampathika sameekaranam* or economic redistribution reassert Kochunni's identity as a proto-Marxist hero. This is nowhere more clear than in the voice-over narration that identifies his deeds as 'an unsophisticated attempt to bring economic redistribution' (*sampathika sameekaranam nadathanulla aprishkrita yajnam*)—counterintuitively highlighting communism as the sophisticated ideology to meet this end, and the historical land reform act as the context in which it was successfully done. The film thus pays tribute to Kochunni as the precursor of the communist movement in Kerala and identifies it as continuing his mission. The voice over narration continues:

Law bound Kochunni and pronounced the verdict of death. As he walked with unwavering steps to the hang-rope, he turned to his wife Ayisha and asked her to raise his children as good people. When his life ended on the rope, a destitute mother began her life's fight with three naïve infants. In the midst of poverty, pain, and disgrace a mother yearned for a show of kindness, and her children cried for a spoon of gruel.^[32]

The voice over serves to shift the focus of the narrative from Kochunni to his family and plants him within the familial.^[33] The magical and supernatural events that were part of previous iterations are omitted in the opening sequence of the film indicating a consolidated aesthetic shift toward social realism. The film zooms into the local relations that constitute the identity of Kochunni within the reconfigured assemblage and achieves a thematic shift from a folk story to a social drama. This serves the purpose of making the story of Kochunni and his sons more relatable to the audience. This relatability is extremely important to the success of placing the communist as the heir of Kochunni's legacy. The primary antagonist in the film is neither the Nair feudal lord nor the Brahmin, but a local Christian merchant who employs Kochunni's second son in his fishing boat. The merchant gets into a dispute with the younger son of Kochunni when the profits are not handed over. The younger son of Kochunni argues that he only took the money because he never received a share of the profit that was proportional to their labour.^[34] The merchant insults both the sons of Kochunni, calling them 'thiefs' children.' This scene brings into relief the crucial theme of the film—Kochunni's elder son Thambi's ambiguous feelings about his identity as the son of a thief. Unlike his younger brother, who does not shy away from demanding his rights or pick a fight with those who stand in his way, the older son remains a spectator to the injustice and violence that surrounds them. He does not wish to tread the path of violence nor does he wish to challenge the powers that be for fear that it will give life to his identity as a thief. The film follows the life of Thambi, through the numerous situations where he chooses to remain on the side of the law, the merchant class and the police. The character and voice of his younger brother who chastises him for his inaction keeps reminding him of his legacy as the son of Kochunni. While for the younger son, the identity of his father as a thief is not an insult, his older brother remains unconvinced. By bringing the protagonist's struggle with his identity as the son of a thief to the centre of the narrative, the film establishes an affective relationship

between the character's plight and that of the audience within the reconfigured masculine assemblage. The second son is overdetermined by the reconfigured masculine assemblage within which Kochunni fought for his rights and emerged a martyr and hero. In the film, Thambi's redemption and resolution of the narrative arrives as he takes up the legacy of his father as a champion of the destitute thus making him legible within a reconfigured masculine assemblage as the son of the father. While *Kayamkulam Kochunni* highlights the economic inequality of the feudal structure and justifies the redistribution of land, *Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan* is a response to the vestigial guilt of stripping the traditional wealth of the feudal lords. The film purges the narrative of guilt by emplacing the ideal beneficiary of the policy and by replacing them within the heterosexual family through Khader. The narrative posturing of Thambi in his antagonistic relationship with the merchant imagines the communist as a natural heir and continuation of Kochunni's project of equality. The medium of film uses the father-son relationship that carries valence and import within patriarchal, heterosexual matrices to establish a gendered relationship between the body and legacy of Kochunni and the communist party. The project of Kochunni's masculinity inaugurated in the 1966 film thus serves as a phenotype that is constantly and continuously reiterated through and within the reconfigured masculine assemblage.

***Kayamkulam Kochunni* in television**

It is notable that the titles *Kayamkulam Kochunni* and *Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan* had both appeared on television in the form of long-running serials between 2004 and 2007 and 2016 and 2017 respectively. *Kayamkulam Kochunni* enjoyed prime-time viewing and was very well received. The tele-serial follows Kochunni's life and trials within the feudal relations of the society. It expands on Kochunni's world to include other folk heroes like Ithikkara Pakki and Mulamoottil Adima, who jointly contest abuse and the oppression of the agents of state and the society. Of course, both these narratives take from the iterations of the Kochunni story as an egalitarian leader of the masses who uses illegal means and physical strength to help the poor. However, it is also worth mentioning that one of the reasons for their popularity was also the fact that, unlike most of the television serials that ostentatiously catered to women, these were mostly aimed at men. With fight sequences that boasted the finesse of the martial art of Kalari, they justified male participation in television viewing. The plot and theme of the narrative expanded on the themes of inequality and injustice, humiliation and violence perpetrated by the rich and the powerful to present the setting for the fight sequences. It is also notable that the tele-serials also shared the moral view of society, especially one that pegged the honour of a man on a woman's chastity. However, this paper does not intend to go into the details of the tele-serials themselves, owing to their sheer volume. Nonetheless it must be noted that the tele-serials acted as a visible site of reiteration of the masculinity of Kochunni—one that was pegged to an aggressive agonistic relationship between himself and men in power.

Period films in the post-liberalisation era

Scholars from India began addressing Indian masculinity as a critical category only in the 1990s. Men and Masculinity Studies in the Indian context was deployed as a useful heuristic tool to chart the rise of Hindutva as a dominant ideology in relation to the gendered citizen-subject. I have argued elsewhere that these studies were conducted in the backdrop of the rise of Hindutva as a political ideology following the Mandal Commission report in 1990 and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992.^[35] Scholarship from the 1990s suggests that masculinity was a key axis through which national identity was imagined. However, a brief overview of Indian scholarship on men and masculinities displays a gap in responses from literary or film studies. Scholarship on media texts in the post-liberalisation era adds to these studies and traces the reconfigured masculine assemblage through and within which the emergent Hindu nationalist identity was activated and circulated. The argument I make here is that the Hindu masculine

identity became the named object of historiographic analysis, and such studies were responding to a reconfiguration of the masculine assemblage in the wake of post-liberalisation reform. Although the concerns and methods of scholarship on men and masculinities in India has since become more diverse than these early studies, it may prove to be useful to re-examine some of the early concerns, especially since they have grown in political relevance and analysis can now be attempted with the advantage of retrospection. This section examines post-liberalisation period-drama films as sites of activation and the circulation and promotion of a masculine, pan-Indian identity. The third iteration of *Kayamkulam Kochunni* (2018) is located within the reconfigured masculine assemblage of the post-liberalisation era which activates and circulates an aggressive masculine national identity. The study of cultural texts thus is not aimed at a descriptive history of men and their lived experiences but to foreground the reconfigured masculine assemblage through and within which gendered social practices are embodied and deemed masculine. I argue that post-liberalisation period film is an historiographic exercise that reconfigures Kochunni's masculinity within the refashioned masculine assemblage that is inflected by Hindutva ideology and Hindu nationalism.

The 2018 iteration of *Kayamkulam Kochunni* shares distinctive narrative elements with other post-liberalisation period films. For instance, similar to other period films in the post-liberalisation age, the identity of the protagonist pivots on their martial skill. Films like *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (2009),^[36] *Urumi* (2011),^[37] *Kayamkulam Kochunni* (2018) present the warrior hero trained in Kalaripayattu—a martial art practised in Kerala. The mastery of the martial art does not merely point to the physical prowess of the hero, but also extends to his spiritual and moral discipline as well.^[38] Thus, we see in *Pazhassi Raja*, a prince who takes up arms against the British for the welfare of the people;^[39] in *Urumi*, the son of Kotwal who maintains a strict moral code of never harming a woman or child;^[40] and in *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, a thief who resorts to violence for the welfare of the oppressed. The post-liberalisation period films discussed in this section exemplify what Lalita Gopalan calls 'dacoit Westerns'.^[41] Stephen Teo adds to this argument by looking at how scholars have used 'western' as an allegory for the failure of the state.^[42] However, I argue that inasmuch as this category is useful to analyse the stylistic and narrative choices that inform post-liberalisation period films, it cannot address the discursive and historiographic roles that they perform owing to the historical time period that it depicts. I argue that the post-liberalisation period films do not function as allegories but use the allegorical function of the 'Westerns' to present a revisionist history in congruence with the reconfigured masculine assemblage. Further, I use this insight to closely read the 2018 iteration of the story of Kochunni to foreground the narrative choices that the film makes to allow a preservation of caste inequality through and within the reconfigured masculine assemblage.

Urumi, released in 2011 stands alone among post-liberalisation period dramas in Malayalam as it goes back to the arrival of the Portuguese in Malabar—the first direct contact that Europeans ever had with the Indian subcontinent. The choice of this historical moment enlarges the canvas to the nation. *Urumi* narrates the story of Kelu Nayanar, a patriot, and his valiant yet failed attempt to assassinate Vasco da Gama. Kelu, a trained fighter and the son of the former Kotwal of Chirakkal who died at the hands of Gama, wishes to avenge his father's death. Kelu embodies an aggressive masculinity that ridicules the effeminate and equates it to corruption, and conflates sexual prowess with a virtue such as courage.^[43] Kelu's selfhood conflates heterosexuality with moral and ethical uprightness and aggressiveness embodied by martial prowess. The antagonist, be it Vasco da Gama or Chenichery Kurup, embodies treachery, effemininity and ambiguous sexuality. The narrative pitches the gendered identities of these two characters as representative of the tensions between the imperialists and their encomiasts, and the native. Kelu suggests that 'there's a greedy woman who covets gold' inside Kurup and accuses this femininity for his deceit.^[44] Kurup's femininity becomes a metonym for the deceit and cunning of not just his person but of the Portuguese colonial force for whom he works which is contrasted with the moral masculinity of Kelu and his friends. It imagines the nationalist hero as an embodiment of idealised masculinity. Kelu's bosom friend, a Muslim youth by the name of Vavvali, brings to life the politics of the

good Muslim. While the religious identity of Kelu's Muslim friend does not come into conflict with the narrative of the text, it does come into play by restricting their ability to embody the ideal citizen-subject that is imagined exclusively through Kelu's body. Similarly, Arakkal Ayisha, a rebel princess who joins Kelu in his fight against the Portuguese, also embodies martial skill and nationalist fervour. Just as with the Muslim, the lower caste, women, and queer bodies are determined in relation to the body of the hero within the narrative, so their bodies are entangled by the same determinations outside the text. These bodies therefore always occupy a precarious position vis-à-vis their identity as citizen-subjects as any resistance or challenge to these determinations will be understood as proof of their insubordination and/or anti-nationalism. The moral masculinity of the hero thus makes effective linkages between sexuality, caste, religious and class positions of the 'other' thus reifying legitimate and illegitimate forms of embodiment.

Post-liberalisation period films are keenly attuned to the problem of religious and caste relations and the impediment these place on imagining a smooth pan-Indian identity. One of the key strategies deployed to smooth over internal differences has been to imagine an all-powerful external rival. A crucial mode of accomplishing this is to present the white man as the visible antagonist. In this context, it is useful to remember that the portraiture of the white coloniser has been drastically different in earlier iterations of period films. For instance, *Veluthampi Dalawa* (1962) penned by Jagathy N. Achary—the scriptwriter for 1966 film *Kayamkulam Kochunni*—does not attempt to portray the colonial officers as all-powerful villains but as cunning opportunists. Their villainy is substantially downplayed by the presence and interactions of comic actors who form their entourage as cooks or translators.^[45] Unlike the post-liberalisation period films, it is the lack of conviction, selfishness and weakness of the Maharajah and the ruling class that ultimately leads to Thampi losing his battle with the colonial officers. This is in sharp contrast to post-liberalisation period films wherein the white man is framed as an all-powerful villain. The treatment of the coloniser's body with high seriousness is a necessity for the affective surfacing of the nationalist hero within the reconfigured masculine assemblage. Furthermore, as argued above, it is also a metonym for anti-national sentiments—threats of which are imminent to the embodiment of the nationalist hero.^[46] Period films become useful sites as culturally coded texts that allow an analysis of the seepages of masculine Hinduism and its circulation. *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (2009) zooms in on the conflict between the English East India Company and Kerala Varma, the ruler of Kottayam. Here again, nationalist sentiment becomes conflated with the aggressive masculinity of the hero. Aggressive masculinity becomes the only possibility of imagining a selfhood within these agonistic narratives. Nationalism is therefore reiterated within contemporaneity as an essentially masculine and violent practical achievement. A crucial aspect of aggressive masculinity is its moral superiority. It is not merely aggressive for the sake of conflict but it is driven by a moral vision. It is to be noted that while asserting the moral virtue of the actions of the protagonist, the narrative also places the 'other' as a necessary opponent, automatically making them morally suspect. Thus, period film pitches the warrior hero who embodies a moralistic masculinity against an antagonist who necessarily embodies an immoral masculinity that plays out in the form of deceit, shrewdness, deception and cunning. Although the agonism is played out between the European coloniser and the hero, the failure of the hero comes as a consequence of the actions of the native other. Thus, the effeminate Kurup in *Urumi*, the tribal chief in *Pazhassi Raja*, who lead to the downfall of the hero also remind the viewer of the ever-present political threat that the other represents to the nationalist ethos through their metonymic relationship with the masculine identity of the hero.

***Kayamkulam Kochunni: The Indian Robinhood* (2018)**

The 2018 film *Kayamkulam Kochunni: The Indian Robinhood* makes a startling departure from other iterations of the Kochunni story in its incontrovertible presentation of the white man as the primary villain/antagonist. Unlike other iterations of the Kochunni story, the 2018 film opens on the days leading

to Kochunni's execution. A royal proclamation announces the verdict relating to Kayamkulam Kochunni's while the montage presents faces of people visibly disturbed by the news. The Maharajah of Travancore is alerted to rising tensions as hundreds of people from Kayamkulam arrive at the palace to receive Kochunni's body. As the shots of the English East India Company's flag and the colonial officers checking the hanging rope fades, we see the silhouette of Kayamkulam Kochunni moving inside the jail and hear Mohanlal's voice opening the narration:

This is his story: from folk tales, from *Aithihyamala*, from the pages of history, from the stories said by grandmothers, from the numerous levels of meaning which remained unread between lines. As long as *Malayalanadu* [Kerala] exists, as long as *Malayali* exists, this is the story of he who remains immortal among the generations today and those yet to come.^[47]

Through choral and percussion heavy music arrangement, and choice shots that even include the Maharajah of Travancore, the film uses a *darsanic* gaze^[48] to paint Kochunni as a larger-than-life figure who, far from Sankunni's thief or Achary's local hero, is a legendary figure even when he was alive. This section examines how the 2018 film eternalises the masculinity of Kochunni through configurations of caste and gender relations within post-liberalisation masculine assemblage and genders its audience through a *darsanic* relationship. Unlike other iterations of Kayamkulam Kochunni that narrativises the life of a local dacoit, and in line with other post-liberalisation period films *Kayamkulam Kochunni* (2018), locates the eponymous hero on a much larger canvas—that of the nation. It pits him against the English East India Company, the historiophoty of which is aggressively marked using the red coat military uniform and symbols of colonial presence like the flag of the East India Company. As Kochunni's story is told in a flashback, we see how the animosity between him and the English developed. At his first encounter with the English, he is awarded a medal for his bravery by the British Commander for saving an innocent's life—a narrative tactic to add the subtext that the hero's virtue is recognised even by the enemy. Upon Kochunni's request he is granted permission to participate in the evening's entertainment at Junior Sahib's compound. The first skirmish between Kochunni and the English begins at this event when he stops the Junior Sahib from undressing a local woman in public. He says: 'In addition to coming from some other land and living in ours, what they say is now the law.'^[49] The voice-over narration rereads the dacoity of the eponymous hero as acts of aggression or resistance against the congealed power of the upper-caste masters and the colonial administrators. Kayamkulam Kochunni is not a hedonist dacoit or a proto-Marxist but an anti-colonial patriot in this iteration similar to heroes of other post-liberalisation period films. The voice-over narration deploys the term 'Malayali' to imagine a smooth ethno-national identity. Deploying the term Malayali emplaces Kochunni within the history of the nation. The film's subtitle *The Indian Robinhood* activates Kochunni's figuration as a nationalist and an archetypal saviour of the masses. The category of Malayali acts as a metonym for the reconfigured masculine assemblage that activates Kochunni as an icon and historical predecessor of the patriotic Malayali man.

As is evident from the previous sections, caste inequality acts as a crucial determinant in the masculine assemblages through and within which Kochunni's story is narrativised. In Sankunni's narrative, Kochunni's obeisance toward the Malayala Brahmin is a redeeming virtue, and in Achary's iteration caste inequality is subsumed under economic inequality thus rereading Kochunni as an instrument of redistribution of wealth. However, the 2018 film does not shy away from addressing the question of caste oppression. Indeed, there are a number of instances where upper-caste landlords are directly challenged by Kochunni. The scope of this paper does not allow for an exposition of the reasons for the prominence of anti-caste politics within the reconfigured post-liberalisation masculine assemblage. However, the paper continues its lateral investigation of the linkages between caste and the reconfigured masculinity through its analysis of Kochunni in the 2018 iteration. I argue that the film treats caste as an institution of the past thereby invisibilising its operation within contemporaneity, and what's more, determines and activates its operation through and within the reconfigured masculine assemblage. The film accomplishes this by drawing from the diegetic and non-diegetic spaces of its circulation.

The film depicts Kochunni as aware of a mutually beneficial relationship between the English and the upper castes. However, the film equates caste inequality with caste violence and translates it into film in the form of gross physical violence inflicted on lower-caste bodies. The normalisation of gratuitous violence onscreen on lower-caste bodies serves as the means by which to generate a textual and temporal break with contemporaneity wherein violence perpetrated against lower-caste bodies is exceptionised. While the act of exceptionising instances of caste violence shores up the overarching smooth identity of Malayali, the simultaneous portrayal of abject violence and the humiliation of lower-caste bodies in the period drama serves to delink caste inequality from contemporaneity. The historicisation of caste oppression is thus pegged to the good faith of the Malayali identity that proscribes caste violence within the contemporary. It is interesting to note that this anti-caste diktat is issued in the film by the figure of Ithikkara Pakki played by Mohanlal. Meena T. Pillai, in 'The Feudal Lord Reincarnate' analyses the discursive construction of Mohanlal's stardom by reading his upper-caste embodiment both onscreen and offscreen.

In Pillai's view, Mohanlal's body and stardom is emblematic of the post-liberalisation revivalism and idealisation of the feudal past in Kerala.^[50] In the context of this paper, it is useful to emphasise and add the laudatory view of Mohanlal's martial arts skill and Kalaripayattu training to the list of Pillai's 'Malayali traits' that his body and stardom confer. That Pakki is played by an actor who embodies the 'feudal lord reincarnate' in the context of Malayalam film makes the politics of caste that he espouses more suspicious. Kochunni's encounter with Pakki is narrativised as a turning point and momentous event in this iteration. It is under Pakki's mentoring that Kochunni invents his new identity as Kayamkulam Kochunni—the saviour of the lower castes and the downtrodden. Pakki counsels Kochunni and, in a lengthy montage (4 minutes), trains Kochunni to gain physical endurance. In his very first foray into the public arena after the training montage, Kochunni emerges from the waters signifying an enduring transformation. The film marks the impact of Pakki on Kochunni using embodied markers of masculine identity—a prominent scar on the forehead and a bold moustache.^[51] Thus the period of mentoring under Pakki allows the actor to lay claim to the patrimony of Mohanlal's stardom. Pakki declares: 'No upper-caste will henceforth raise their hands against any of the lower caste, no child of the poor will cry of hunger. Henceforth in Kayamkulam, [holds Kochunni abreast] he will set the law. The law of Kochunni.'^[52] As I mentioned earlier in the paper, the reading of the dacoit Western as a political allegory of the failure of the State does not hold much purchase in examining these films. Nor is the analysis of the 2018 film, a dacoit Western par excellence, as an allegory of the contemporary political moment. Here, I must emphasise that such a reading does not appeal to me as it signifies a lack of self-reflexivity resulting in the reification of internalisation of agonistic masculinity in the treatment of narratives about the lives of men. Therefore, I look at the text from a queer distance to argue that the allegorical function of the Western is deployed to generate a revisionist historiography where the story of Kochunni acts as a metonym for the reconfigured masculine assemblage. Unlike the allegory, which allows a concomitance between historical events and representations and the moment of production and reading of the text, the metonym anticipates greater degrees of separation between the moment of production and reading and the object that the text signifies. I argue that in the context of the period film—which is temporally separated from the post-liberalisation milieu—it is the reconfigured masculinity of the hero that metonymically activates the film through and within the reconfigured post-liberalisation masculine assemblage.

The 'law of Kochunni' attests to a political vision that allows Kochunni to embody a paternalistic attitude towards the lower-caste village, where lower-caste bodies are turned into soft spoken, humble, non-threatening subordinates. Even as the feudal-masculine onscreen identity of Mohanlal more than remedies for the anti-caste rhetoric that Pakki floats in the film, Kochunni's body becomes an onscreen symbol for the continuing paternalism that he displaces by ostentatiously challenging the upper castes within the text. Kochunni, in this iteration, is an exemplar of the Robinhood archetype while the rogue dacoit that Pakki portrays largely resembles Sankunni's Kochunni in their hedonism and anti-

establishment fervour. The gold and grain that Kochunni gains through dacoity is distributed among the lower castes. He does not lay claim to it or enjoy it for himself. Rather, he assumes a paternalistic role which oversees the activities of the lower-caste village. The gendered paternalistic character of Ithikkara Pakki and Kochunni echoes the policy and political stance that lower-caste bodies are capable only of patronage thus denying them agency and self-determination.

It is noteworthy that while caste oppression is historicised in the film by its depiction of normalised gratuitous violence, the caste system itself does not attract any criticism. Instead, the film presents a romanticised version of the feudal past. This is evident in the fawning representation of Maharajah Swati Tirunal—the supreme overlord of the feudal hierarchy. That the rendezvous between Kochunni and Swati Tirunal, the Maharajah of Travancore, in the forest appears in the scenes that immediately follow Pakki's speech is no coincidence. In this scene, Kochunni saves the Maharajah who is lost and hurt during a hunt. Indeed, the letter that the Maharajah presents Kochunni at this rendezvous aids his escape in the denouement of the film. By extending his goodwill to Kochunni, the Maharajah is represented as an ally of Kochunni. Like the Thakur in Prasad's analysis of *Sholay*, the Maharajah thus comes to play a central narrative role in the film as an agent of the goodness that Kochunni represents.^[53] Within the Thangal, Kochunni's martial arts teacher, carries the letter to the incumbent Maharajah who grants him an audience with Kochunni which helps him escape the gallows.

The film interweaves events like the reign of Utram Tirunal Maharajah, the coronation of Swati Tirunal and the rendezvous with Swati Tirunal Maharajah to grant historical legitimacy to the iteration. In his exposition of Malayalam literary histories of the late nineteenth century Udaya Kumar highlights their role 'as a species of history [that] are often caught up in wide ranging set of discourses on collectively shared pasts.'^[54] The narrative enganglement of the Maharajah in this iteration of the story of Kochunni historicises the aggressive masculinity of Kochunni thus allowing a normative 'structuring of heritage' of the same within the post-liberalisation assemblage—the eternalisation of this historically contingent masculinity.^[55] Beyond the historicity that these figures bring to the text, the text itself reconfigures these historical agents through and within the post-liberalisation masculine assemblage and invests them with an aura of magnanimity and righteousness in a way that obfuscates the complicity of their office in caste oppression. The narrative presents the Maharajah as a saintly figure with an otherworldly air who is untouched by the evils of the world. The depiction of the Maharajah as a soft-spoken man who is incapable of killing his wounded horse is a moment of affective reconfiguration of the identity of the feudal king.

The stark contrast in representation of Swati Tirunal Maharajah between *Aithihyamala* (where Swati Tirunal Maharajah is depicted as a fearsome prince so intimidating that Sankunni refers to him as *Narasimhashamsasambhootan*)^[56] and the 2018 film is indicative of a shift in the ways in which caste structures are legitimised within the post-liberalisation milieu. In comparison to Sankunni's narrative, where the respect Kochunni shows to the Brahmins becomes the redeeming virtue, in the 2018 film it is his obeisance toward the Maharajah that becomes his saving grace. In addition to emphasising the virtue of the feudal prince the blame of caste oppression is shifted to the corrupt and conniving masters and their greed—whom Kochunni threatens and targets with violence. Thus, the film shifts the moral and ethical burden of caste inequality and oppression from the institution of caste to the historical figure of the upper-caste landlord. The textual manoeuvre of historicising caste is accomplished within the extra-diegetic space of Kerala where land reform led to a redistribution of the wealth of the greedy and corrupt landlord.

Thus, the 2018 film makes use of the milieu of post-land reform Kerala that holds the historical landlord solely responsible for caste oppression. By portraying caste inequality as abject violence and a humiliation of lower-caste bodies, and pinning down the blame of caste oppression on the historical figure of feudal lords, the film presents the caste system as a part of Kerala's historical past and activates

a masculine assemblage through and within which Kochunni embodies the Malayali identity. Thus, the film acts as an historical text that exhumes and reinforces a romantic notion of its past by identifying the now extinct historical figure of the unjust upper-caste landlord as the perpetrator of caste inequality while simultaneously invisibilising and facilitating the continuation of the operation of caste through an aggressive masculine embodiment of Kochunni within contemporary Kerala.

Although Kochunni's identity as a patriot is postured in an agonistic relationship with the villainous coloniser, the contention between the two is played out on screen through a rivalry with another native man—Keshavan—a disillusioned student of their martial arts teacher. Infuriated over the teacher's choice of Kochunni as his successor, Keshavan leaves him and joins the police force to return as the *thananaik* or station-inspector of Kayamkulam. The text creates a binary pair between them: while Kochunni embodies righteousness, selflessness, and fairness, Keshavan is cunning, self-aggrandising and proud. Furthermore, their masculinity is also metonymically linked to the political and social institutions with which they are affiliated. The narrative thus links Keshavan to the colonial state, the conniving landlords, and the English East India Company while Kochunni is linked to Ithikkara Pakki, Swati Tirunal, the martial arts teacher and the imagined community of Malayali. Keshavan, and his contentious relationship with Kochunni, is an invention of the 2018 iteration which serves to transpose the agonism between the native and the coloniser onto the contention between two native men. Even as Kochunni is the archetypal Malayali nationalist within the post-liberalisation text, Keshavan represents the political threat to this identity. The figure of Keshavan, and his contention with Kochunni effectively depoliticises the discourse by replacing the politics of caste or gender with the theatre of aggressive physical contention between the two men. Keshavan and Janaki in *Kayamkulam Kochunni* (2018), Chenicherry Kurup in *Urumi* (2011) and the tribal chief in *Pazhassi Raja* (2009) play the role of the native who betrays the trust of the patriotic hero during crucial moments of contention with the coloniser. Their role as the onscreen agents of the villain reinforces the dichotomy between good and evil and amplifies the allegorical function of the Western. It reinforces their embodiment as inherently susceptible to evil and corruption, and by contrasting them with the patriotic hero whose personal losses are now counted as the losses of the nation, orients and mobilises the audience to negate any threats to nationalist fervour and masculinity embodied by the hero.

In the 2018 iteration, Kochunni escapes the gallows and rides into the landscape on a horse. The narrative also ends on this note—with shots of a temple where Kochunni's mortal remains are buried. Actor Mohanlal's voice concludes the narrative by saying that 'in Idappara Maladevarnada temple near Pathanamthitta, this Mussalman still resides, to wipe the tears of the poor, beyond caste and religion, as a divine form—Kayamkulam Kochunni.'^[57] The text gives proof to the unity and currency of the identity of the Malayali patriot through the immortalisation of Kochunni while the antithetical figuration of Keshavan reminds the audience of the ever-present political threat. The aggressive anti-caste dialogues and violence of Kochunni and Pakki against the conniving upper castes seems hollow if only because the narrative itself reproduces caste relations in a reconfigured fashion. The film achieves this through and within a masculine assemblage where masculinity is narrativised as an aggressive, nationalist, moral performance, and as an ideal for the ethno-national identity of the Malayali. Thus, the deification of Kochunni in the epilogue is a *post res* reinforcement of the *darsanic* relation that the film establishes between the reconfigured masculinity of Kochunni and the gendered spectator.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have achieved two objectives. I have moved analysis away from the study of masculinity as a positive category to what and how bodies are deemed masculine in specific spatio-temporal locations by shifting the focus from the individual experiences of men to the assemblages that activate masculine identity. Second, I have challenged the stable and immutable conceptualisation of social

determinants like caste in gendering subjects within particular masculine assemblages. I have accomplished this by highlighting the project of gendered historiography that post-liberalisation period films achieve by reconfiguring the masculinity of the protagonist. I argue that such reconfigurations of masculinity do not occur in isolation but in tandem with other social determinants like caste, which in turn are reconfigured by the reshaped masculine assemblages. Therefore, I argue that obstinacy of vectors of inequality like caste are intimately linked to the reconfiguration of the masculine assemblage. As such, historiographic projects must be alert to the ways in which the dominant preserves itself through re-configurations of what is deemed masculine.

Notes

[1] Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard. 'What Have Historians Done with Masculinity? Reflections on Five Centuries of British History, circa 500-1950,' *Journal of British Studies* 44(2) (2005): 274–80, doi: [10.1086/427125](https://doi.org/10.1086/427125); John Tosh, 'The History of Masculinity: An Outdated Concept?,' in *What is Masculinity: Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World*, ed. John H. Arnold and Sean Brady, 17–34, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2011, doi: [10.1057/9780230307254_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230307254_2).

[2] Tosh, 'The History of Masculinity,' p. 23.

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, p. 4.

[4] Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, p. 7.

[5] Joseph Campana, 'Distribution, assemblage, capacity: new keywords for masculinity?,' *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 22(4) (2015): 691–97, specifically p. 694, doi: [10.1080/13507486.2015.1028337](https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2015.1028337).

[6] Campana, 'Distribution, assemblage, capacity: new keywords for masculinity,' p. 694.

[7] Kottarathil Sankunni, *Aithihyamala*, Kottayam: DC Books, 2017. First published in 8 volumes 1909–34 by Vellaykkal Narayanamenon (Thrissur).

[8] Hans Harder, 'Introduction,' in *Literature and Nationalist Ideology: Writing Histories of Modern Indian Languages*, ed. Hans Harder, 1–18, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2018, specifically p. 7.

[9] Harder, 'Introduction,' p. 9.

[10] Kottarathil Sankunni, 'Kayamkulam Kochunni,' in *Aithihyamala*, Kottayam: DC Books, 2017, 189–16, specifically p. 189. All translations in this paper, unless specified otherwise, are my own.

[11] The word dacoit comes from the Hindi word *daku* and is used to refer to armed robbers in the Indian subcontinent. I expand on the significance of the word later in the paper in the analysis of the 2018 film *Kayamkulam Kochunni: An Indian Robinhood*. *Kayamkulam Kochunni: The Indian Robinhood*. 170 mins, directed by Rosshan Andrews, 2018, Kochi: Sree Gokulam Movies, Prime Video, accessed 24 Sep. 2023.

[12] Sankunni, 'Kayamkulam Kochunni,' p. 193.

[13] Sankunni, 'Kayamkulam Kochunni,' p. 216.

[14] The lowest strata of the four caste groups.

[15] Sankunni 'Kayamkulam Kochunni,' pp. 214–16.

[16] An historically landowning caste in Kerala.

[17] Sankunni, 'Kayamkulam Kochunni,' pp. 205, 207, 211.

[18] Sankunni, 'Preface,' in *Aithihyamala*, Kottayam: DC Books, 2017, p. 10.

[19] Sankunni, 'Kayamkulam Kochunni,' p. 213.

[20] [Kayamkulam Kochunni](#), 118 mins, 1966, directed by P. A. Thomas, *YouTube*, accessed 7 Oct. 2023.

[21] *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, 00:52:00.

[22] *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, 1:00:00–1:02:00.

[23] Sudipta Kaviraj enumerates the inability of the Indian communist movement to take note of caste in their analysis of feudal society. See Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Marxism in translation: Critical reflections on Indian radical thought,' in *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn*, ed. R. Bourke & R. Geuss, 172–200, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 doi: [10.1017/CBO9780511605468.007](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511605468.007).

[24] *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, 1:49:12–1:50:00.

[25] Bourdieu points out that 'the strength of the masculine order is that it dispenses with justification.' Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, p. 9.

[26] Madhava M. Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1998, p. 152; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1969, p. 14; Bishnupriya Ghosh, 'Sensate Outlaws: The Recursive Social Bandit in Indian Popular Cultures,' in *Figurations in Indian Film*, ed. Meheli Sen and Anustup Basu, 21–43, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, specifically p. 23.

[27] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, p. 14.

[28] Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, p. 152.

[29] *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, 1:56:00.

[30] [Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan](#), 153 mins, 1976, directed by J. Sasikumar, *YouTube*, accessed 8 Oct. 2023.

[31] *Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan*, 00:00:10–00:02:00.

[32] *Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan*, 00:02:00–00:03:40.

[33] The emergence of a uniform conception of family; formation of the state of Kerala and the first communist government in the world.

[34] *Kayamkulam Kochunniyude Makan*, 1:06:12.

[35] Tony Sebastian, 'A Critical Appraisal of Men and Masculinity Studies in India,' in *Men and Masculinities in the Global South: A Southern Perspective*, ed. José Loureiro, London: Vernon Press, forthcoming Jan. 2024.

[36] [Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja](#), 188 mins, produced by Sree Gokulam Movies, directed by Hariharan, *Disney+ Hotstar*, accessed 28 September 2023.

[37] [Urumi](#), 172 mins, 2011, directed by Santhosh Sivan, Thiruvananthapuram: August Cinema, DVD, accessed 1 Dec. 2023.

[38] Joseph Alter looks at wrestling as a mode of embodiment through which the masculinity of the citizen-subject was imagined. Alter's scholarship understands wrestling as a martial sport not only celebrated through virility, muscularity and aggressiveness, but through controls and restraints on bodily emissions and desires, played out as a technology of the self and masculine embodiment—that is not merely strength but a learned form of embodiment through practice and mastery of martial arts like 'Kalaripayattu.' Indeed, post-liberalisation period dramas often present warriors who embody the discipline that such ideals provide. See Joseph Alter, 'The Sanyasi and the Indian Wrestler: The Anatomy of a Relationship,' *American Ethnologist* 16(2) (May 1992): 317–36.

[39] The scene where he confronts his Maternal uncle, the incumbent ruler of Kottayam, Pazhassi enumerates the reasons for his decision to resist the British. He criticises that his palace was ransacked by the British while unguarded—an event he diagnoses as a symptom of the [English East India] Company's lack of moral fiber. Pazhassi ties the loss of his wealth to the larger economic crisis in his principality caused by the disproportionate increase in taxes. He laments that several tenant farmers have

either committed suicide or have been dispossessed. The scene is also significant as it sets the conflict in the film in motion through the now famous line or warcry: 'The Company is yet to see its battles with Pazhassi.' *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja*, 00:18:34–00:20:50.

[40] *Urumi*, 00:24:40–00:25:12.

[41] Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, London: British Film Institute, 2002, p. 74.

[42] [Stephen Teo](#), 'Sholay, the Western's Passage to India,' in his *Eastern Westerns: Film and Genre inside and outside Hollywood*, 109–128, Oxon: Routledge, 2017, accessed 27 Nov. 2023.

[43] Kelu mocks the crown prince of Chirakkal to fight for his kingdom if his penis has as much strength as a common house gecko's tail. *Urumi*, 00:44:10–00:44:20.

[44] *Urumi*, 02:14:08–02:14:20.

[45] [Veluthampi Dalawa](#), 162 mins, 1962, screenplay by Jagathy N. K. Achary, directed by G. Viswanathan, *YouTube*, accessed 10 Oct. 2023.

[46] Sikata Banerjee follows Radhika Singha's work on nationalism, colonialism and the politics of masculinity and accords a central role to violent conceptions of masculinity in the constitution of the modern Hindu identity and qualifies it as 'Masculine Hinduism.' Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!: Masculinity, Hinduism and Nationalism in India*, New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005; Radhika Singha, 'Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Politics of Masculinity,' *Studies in History* 14(1) (Feb. 1998): 127–46, doi: [10.1177/025764309801400105](https://doi.org/10.1177/025764309801400105).

[47] *Kayamkulam*, 00:07:44–00:08:22. **Is this film called *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, or just *Kayamkulam*? Please check all endnotes to make sure short titles are all accurate and consistent.**

[48] Prasad writes: 'The object of the *darsanic* gaze is a superior, a divine figure or a king. The object of the *darsanic* gaze is only amenable to a symbolic identification ... in symbolic identification we identify ourself with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable, at the point which eludes resemblance.' Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, p. 76. Kochunni is separated from the ordinary individual by virtue of his location within a historically different time period and thus becomes inimitable. Nonetheless, he is made available and identified through an explicit reconfiguration of his masculinity.

[49] *Kayamkulam*, 00:20:48–00:20:52.

[50] Meena T. Pillai, 'The Feudal Lord Reincarnate: Mohanlal and the Politics of Malayali Masculinity,' in *Indian Film Stars: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence Michael, 99–108, London: British Film Institute 2020, specifically p. 107.

[51] *Kayamkulam*, 01:16:11–01:16:15.

[52] *Kayamkulam*, 01:23:00–01:23:18.

[53] Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, p. 154.

[54] Udaya Kumar, 'Shaping a Literary Space: Early Literary Histories in Malayalam and Normative Uses of the Past,' in *Literature and Nationalist Ideology: Writing Histories of Modern Indian Languages*, ed. Hans Harder, 19–50, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2018, specifically p. 24.

[55] Kumar, 'Shaping Shaping a Literary Space,' 24; Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, p. 4.

[56] In a section titled 'Swati Tirunal Tirumanasukundu' (On His Highness Swati Tirunal), Kochunni writes that the prince was intimidating to a degree that people would faint if he looked at them in the eye. This prompts him to record that people believed that he was *Narasimhashamsasambhoothan* or born with a part of Narasimha (Man-Lion) avatar of Lord Vishnu. Kottarathil Sankunni, 'Swati Tirunal Tirumanassukundu,' in *Aithihyamala*, Kottayam: DC Books, 2017, 409–17, specifically p. 413.

[57] *Kayamkulam*, 02:28:00–02:30:00.

MAIN

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue50/sebastian.html>

© [Copyright](#)

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#)

Last modified: 27 December 2023 1316