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# **POPULARITY AND INFLUENCE OF SPORTS FILMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON PUBLIC RESPONSE TOWARDS SELECTED FILMS IN MALAYALAM**

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**Abstract:** Films became the most popular and successful medium of communication and propaganda making since the beginning of the cold war, partially by political reasons and majorly by market tendencies. However, like any other art forms, it also keeps the signature of time, idea, and people behind them. Sports films were not different. Since the beginning of the new century, the number of sports films increased in different languages of Indian films. Even though less in number, the Malayalam film industry also contributed some of them. The present paper investigates the popular response towards such films made in the Malayalam language from time to time. A random survey was conducted, and simple arithmetic techniques were used to develop the text here.

**Keywords:** Sports Films, Mollywood, Malayalam Films, Genre.

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**Introduction:** Since the beginning, films always captured and showed the reality of the outer world in different formats, styles and genres (Fiorelli, 2016). Such adaptations helped people to consider or understand their surroundings in a different manner. Along with this social function, films were used to spread propaganda (Fedorov, 2016). Different governments and peoples' collectives used the medium of films, both directly and indirectly, to spread their doctrines among larger masses. Films are capable of creating a lasting impression with their audio and video tracks, compare to other forms of art, in the conscious as well as unconscious mind of viewers (Galloway, 2011; Mulvey, 1988); even though highly expensive compared to other forms of art, the above quality of films attracts both talent and finance to use it as a medium of creating favourable public opinion.

Films are unique among art forms as it embodies the essence of all other forms of art in one format or other (Hopkins, 2008). Films result from combining story, photography, acting, painting, visual effects, and many other independent art formats; hence, it needs the meaningful collaboration of various kinds of artists. The creation of a film is time-taking and expensive too. However, on the contrary, films were not even considered as an art form initially because they were accessible to the public (Canuel, 2012). The belief that art should be created for and experienced by the elite only was very dominant in those days, and thus the introduction of films became a social revolution in art history (Tomasson, 2011). Compare to other art forms, a good film requires the systematic organization of several artists and art forms. Films make awareness as well as addiction. It makes awareness about other cultures, exposes social and political issues, reflects on people's diverse concerns, anxieties and aspirations, and influence larger masses in a specific direction. Watching any film will help to develop creativity. But they are capable of provoking, too, like any other art form. So that, as films are sharp double-edged weapons, any approach on endorsing, promoting or suppressing films must be taken with detailed studies and utmost care (Igartua & Barrios, 2012).

**Background of the Study:** Considering the growing population and related health issues in a society like Kerala, promoting sports is the cheapest but best strategy to guarantee minimum essential health to the masses. As sports encourage several people to come together, authorities should provide minimum sports infrastructure accessible to all, like playgrounds. Otherwise, many resources will be wasted while individuals themselves create facilities for exercise and physical recreation. More than that, private provision of sports facilities discourage those who cannot afford it from participating in such activities (Tapper, 2016). But just

providing infrastructure facilities alone will not create a healthy sports culture. Creating awareness on the importance of sports and addressing the existing taboos related is more urgent, if not all physical infrastructure will become underutilised. Various art forms are becoming relevant here. Among them, films on sports can impress and influence people to actively participating in such activities.

Similarly, the construction of cinematic space meaningfully reflects the time, ideas and people who make them (Batuman, 2008). All films represent and reflect the value system, social tensions, political vibrancy, cultural ethos and economic circumstances of the time and society it made vaguely or clearly. So that any film is an excellent object of scholarly research, this general rule is applicable in sports films also because the realistic representation of making of a player or a team has to address all existing and prevalent barriers in the society like social and economic hierarchy, cultural taboos and political discrimination among others. It also carries the personal bias or preference of the filmmakers. In such a situation, the absence of any accidental bias is not entirely possible. However, through the knowledge and personnel experience in sports and understanding of the real issues existing related to the topic, the filmmakers can carve out the most realistic film possible. Even though several artists are working in a film, it is very few of them are taking the ultimate decisions on everything in it as others are only responding to them. So that sports films, like any other art forms, always embody and reveal more than sports.

**Statement of the Problem:** Malayalam film is one of the economically vibrant and qualitatively acclaimed regional industries in the world. There were many internationally recognised films made in Mollywood. Within Indian languages, Malayalam was the flagbearer of several film waves in the past. But the industry was not able to make any landmark sports films like in Tamil, Telugu or Hindi. The present paper attempts to understand its reasons by noting down the evolutionary history of such films and the ongoing debates on diverse issues among filmmakers, critics and the public.

**Objectives of the Study:** The present paper attempts to trace the beginning and gradual formation of sports films as an exclusive genre of the Malayalam film industry. Along with that, the popularity of and the public perception of such films was also attempted here. The diverse debates on the nature of sports films and the relevance of such a genre are also discussed. The relevant research questions are given in the following.

1. How and when sports films became a separate genre in the Malayalam language?
2. What were the ideological debates related to sports films in the Malayalam language?
3. What is the general public perception of sports films released in the Malayalam language?

**Review of Literature:** Sociologists and other scholars recognized long back itself the mirror effect of sports in representing and reflecting the social life. The exclusive studies on sports in films were started in the west in the eighties itself (Baker, 1998; Bergan, 1982) but still remaining as an under-researched discipline. Scholars examined the influence and impact of sports in different societies (Pearson, Curtis, Haney, & Zhang, 2003). However, the real sports and the issues within were not realistically captured in films even though present days are better than the past (Rowe, 1998). There were critical observations on diverse genres in films in the West (Neale, 2000), also like what going on in mollywood nowadays. The positive effects of sports films on society, like the growth of self-esteem, social integration (Assumpcao, Silva, Silva, & Franca, 2016), and on the contrary, the counterproductive impacts like smoking (Charlesworth & Glance, 2005), consumption of alcohol (Finley & Finley, 2005) and violence (Manganello, 2008) of the same were examined in-depth. Similarly, there were exclusive studies on films of particular sports forms (Leger, 1996; Dickerson, 1991).

**Methodology:** The first research question of the paper is about the history of sports films in Kerala. For that, we are adopting the content analysis of different films in order to classify them as either sports films or not. The secondary sources were also used. A sports film is defined in this paper as any kind of film in which either training or performing or both in one or more sports or conducting of any sports tournament becomes one of its central themes. Classification of sports films was done based on this definition. We employ a standard methodology to address later ones. The second research question is about the scholarly debate on whether an exclusive sports genre is relevant or not, at least in the comparatively smaller Malayalam industry. Similarly, another debate among film critics whether those show state-recognized present sports forms like boat-race and Kalaripayattu are coming under sports films or not is also addressed here.

Public perception of sports films is about popular questions such as inspiration, the realistic adaptation of events and casting in those Malayalam films that display sports. The researchers adopted the random sample method to collect data about the second and third research questions. The data were collected from different venues of the International Film Festival of Kerala 2016. Personnel relationships were utilized in order to meet each respondent according to the objective of the paper. The convenience of each respondent was ensured, and each of them was informed about the purpose of the study to ensure the reliability of the data. Maximum care was taken in order to seek information mainly from experienced male and female film viewers. An open-ended questionnaire was used, incorporating the relevant themes related to the objectives in mind, to collect data from the field. The questionnaire had incorporated questions to understand how different respondents evaluate sports films, in general, and what they expect from such films. The respondents were not merely giving short answers to any enquiry but carried the discussion with reconsidering even their previous observations in a scholarly manner. Their in-depth observation skills and knowledge of films helped to enrich those interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded for detailed scrutiny later.

**Analysis and Discussion on Findings:** The details of respondents according to their respective districts, profession and age are given in the following.

**Table 1:** Details of Respondents based on Districts, Age, and Profession

Name of the Field	Number of Respondents according to Profession										Grand Total
	Artists		Teachers		Activists		Research Scholars		Total		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
TVPM	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	3	1	4
KTYM	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	2	2	4
ENKM	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	2	2	4
TSR	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	3	4
KKD	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	3	4
KNR	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	3	1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>24</b>
Age group (in years)	Artists		Teachers		Activists		Research Scholars		Total		
20-29	1		2		1		3		7		
30-39	2		1		2		3		8		
40-49	2		1		2		0		5		
50-59	1		2		1		0		4		
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>		<b>6</b>		<b>6</b>		<b>6</b>		<b>24</b>		

TVPM - Thiruvananthapuram; KTYM - Kottayam; ENKM - Ernakulam; TSR - Thrissur; KKD - Kozhikode; KNR - Kannur. Source: calculated figures

There were 24 respondents equally from six different districts of Kerala, namely Thiruvananthapuram, Kottayam, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Kozhikode and Kannur. One person each was selected district-wise from the professions of artists, teachers, activists and research community. Respondents were taken from these professions because they expected to make independent and critical observations about the questions they call on. Their age ranges from 27 to 57 years. The details of their age are given in the table itself. In addition, a brief explanation of data collected from content analysis of films and secondary sources and direct interview with respondents are given below.

The first objective was about a brief but sufficient description of the sports film in Malayalam. Like elsewhere, Malayalam also made films based on Puranas and myths for a long time. However, 'Jeevitha Nauka' (directed by K.Vembu in 1951) brought the first turning point as it portrayed social issues in films for the first time. Even though those socially relevant films were made from time to time, most films were commercially motivated operas showing either mafia or romance. The 'New Wave' brought by 'Swayamvaram' in 1972 (directed by

Adoor Gopalakrishnan) brought unconventional social and political issues into the mainstream of Malayalam films. The parallel stream created in that decade got strengthened from then onwards. Through the International film festival of Kerala and film societies in different towns, budding filmmakers were exposed to the changing landscapes of world films, and they brought the spirit of such revolutionary ideas into Malayalam gradually. They discovered those hidden issues and themes from their surroundings which include sports.

The genre of sports films in Malayalam is relatively underdeveloped, so that it will be difficult to name any of them as a perfect sports film like those in Hollywood. But those few films were able to expose issues that arise in the various stages of sports and possibilities of what films can provide. The first Malayalam film that showed sports at length is 'Football Champion', starring Prem Nazir, released in 1973. But more than of football or football player, the film is about cheating and other conventional stuff. Then, roughly after a decade, the miserable life of a wrestler was shot in 'Oridathoru Phayalvaan' directed by P. Padmarajan (1981) with the incomparable performance of actor Rashid. Even though a professionally qualified wrestling match and the intense practice sessions showed in the film, it was more about the insecurities and desolations of an ordinary player in contemporary Kerala society. Around the same period, another film was released on wrestling named 'Mutharam Kunnu (PO)' (directed by Sibi Malayil in 1985). It was the only Malayalam film acted by legendary wrestler Dara Singh. However, it was a romantic comedy than a wrestling based film. After that, there was a long gap of two decades in showing sports as a major theme in Malayalam film.

It was in 2006, a film with football named 'Mahasamudram' was released in Kollywood. The film was directed by S. Janardhanan and starring Mohanlal. But, unfortunately, the football matches and the related dialogues were neither reflecting nor explaining the rich football culture of fishermen society in Kerala coastlines. Next year two films, namely 'Goal' (directed by Kamal) and 'Speed Track' (directed by S.L.Puram Jayasurya), were released. They were the first established sports films in Malayalam. In 'Goal', there were lengthy scenes showing recruitment of players and their training, organization of school football tournament and the actual sports performance. Even though it showed romance, bureaucratic red-tapism and ego between students and colleagues in addition to football, that does not disqualify the film from entering into the genuine list of sports films. The case of 'Speed Track' was not different. The rich use of the physical facilities of LNCPE-Thiruvananthapuram and the presentation of real sports stars in the supporting roles enrich the film's content to an extent. But, like 'Goal', this film failed to present any real issues in sports; instead used sports to enlarge the star value of actors.

Joshiy's 'Sevens' (2011) was another film that showed football for a considerably longer duration but failed to highlight anything about the game like 'Mahasamudram'. The first Malayalam film on cricket was 'Mazhavillinattam Vare', directed by Kaithapram Damodaran Namboothiri, released in 2012. The film was about incidents during a cricket coaching camp. The film was hardly released in theatres. 'Rebecca Uthup Kizhakkemala', directed by Sundardas was claimed as a sports film by those behind it but failed to justify that. The film was failed in theatres too. Abrid Shine directed '1983', released in 2014, was another established sports film in Malayalam. The general Indian passion towards cricket, especially of those born and brought up since the 1980s, was well furnished in the film. It also showed the making of a junior cricketer by his father in a very heart touching manner. A similar feeling was created in 'Kochavva Paulo Ayyappa Coelho' released last year. Sidartha Siva directed the film. The successful journey of a village boy with the support of his swimming coach is well narrated in this film. Both films showed the potential of continuous and consistent support in the creation of a successful sports star. They were commercially successful too. Two more films based on volleyball were released last year. The first one, 'Kavi Udheshichathu' (directed by Thomas Kutty Naduvil and Liju Thomas), showed the conduct of one village level volleyball tournament whereas the other one, 'Karinkunnam 6's' (directed by Deepu Karunakaran), showed the institutional efforts to engage prisoners in central jail with volleyball. Both films failed miserably either to project the potential and beauty of volleyball or to inspire its viewers. Still, both of them are undoubtedly sports films.

Another objective of this paper is the relevance of a separate genre on sports in the Malayalam film industry. The respondents agreed that the genre of films is more or less an academic effort as it helps to classify films into different categories based on their general content. However, it is observed that such compartmentalisation of films has overlaps due to the multi-content, especially in modern films. Some of the

respondents believed that such classification of films would encourage filmmakers to add more films as recognition related to smaller compartments of films are easy to realise. As there are not many sports films in Malayalam yet, the validity of this opinion is doubtful. However, some of them pointed out the realistic sports films released in Hollywood, Bollywood or Kollywood due to such professional approach of several decades. Hollywood moved so far from the state-backed politically coloured sports films like Rocky-IV in the eighties to produce films like Ignitus (2009). They made films both from contemporary incidents as well as based on popular stories. Bollywood also made several inspiring films since 'Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar' (1992), like 'Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India' (2001), 'Chak De India' (2007), 'Patiala House' and 'Mary Kom' (2014). The case of Tamil films is not different. Even after criticising 'Badri' (2001), 'Ghilli' (2003), 'Chennai 600028' (2007) and many others for their dominating non-sports content, films like 'Vennila Kabadi Kuzhu' (directed by Susindran in 2009) and 'Aadukalam' (directed by Vetrimaran in 2011) were very much appreciated for its inspiring content. But such a trend is almost absent in Malayalam. Mollywood has films showing sports in one way or another to support the central theme.

Even those that were very close to the genre of sports films actually gave more importance to non-sports themes. In '1983', playing cricket was used to express the father-son relationship. In 'Karinkunnam 6's', the incompetent performance of the actors destroyed the beauty of volleyball. Leading actors cannot replace experienced players of volleyball, even in a film. The case was similar in Sevens and Mahasamudram. But films like 'Vennila Kabadi Kuzhu', 'Chak De India' or 'Dangal' portrayed professional athletic performance of actors. The presence of an exclusive team of making sports films and critics may address positively with the branding of a separate genre of sports films.

Similarly, another debate going on was about the status of Kalaripayattu and sneak boat race as sports. Parallely, this also arises in film circles. If these two events were accepted as sports, then Malayalam is rich with sports films. There were hundreds of films that show the training and performance of kalaripayattu. However, almost all respondents disagreed with this. Firstly, a mere showing of a particular sport in a film does not qualify it to a sports film; if that is the case, numerous films since 'Newspaper Boy' (directed by P.Ramadas in 1955) show some kind of sports activity somewhere in it. But such scenes never make any meaningful contribution to enrich the content of the film. Secondly, instead of showing a mere sports activity, which can be recreational too, a sports film is expected to show competitive spirit in players. Even though this observation excludes many of them, several vadakkan pattu films still show competitive performance on an 'angathattu' (the venue of kalarippayattu performance), which has become one of the important scenes in them. Famous films include 'Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha' (directed by Hariharan in 1989) and 'Thacholi Othenan' (directed by S.S.Rajan in 1964) are rich with such scenes. Similar is the case of 'Thachiledathu Chundan' (directed by Shahoon Karyal in 1999) and 'Jalolsavam' (directed by Sibi Malayil in 2004), which has scenes related to boat-race throughout the film. In this backdrop, another observation was raised. It is about the relationship between institutional arrangements and the real status of sports. Most of them believed that institutional arrangements could only provide legal status to sports. Kalaripayattu and boat race are traditional cultural events of Kerala. Awarding performers in the field or providing legal recognition of competitions cannot qualify them as sports.

The researchers believe that most of the popular sports nowadays were indigenous cultural performances of people somewhere. Traditional martial arts like Karate, Judo, boxing or wrestling are popular sports now. So the status of that granting sport is a kind of advertisement. As several martial arts films are included in the genre of sports films, incorporating Malayalam films of Klaripayattu and boat race into the same list is acceptable. However, respecting the general observation made by interviewed experts and the unending debate going on in the sports circles on granting the status of sports, the researchers are not making any further judgements here.

In the third objective, the public response towards sports films in Malayalam is addressed. In depth, it looked into three different but inter-related aspects, namely the originality in adapting players, their performance and the conducting of events, and the inspiration created by such films. The respondents more or less had a comparatively poor opinion on the standard of Malayalam sports films in any of these categories. It is true that the making of a sports film anywhere ever is always aimed at inspiring its viewers. Even those historical

narratives like 'Lagaan' were made with several scenes that will inspire or disturb the present audience of the film. However, as a commercial venture, films generally have to include such irrelevant scenes or dialogues, which will thrill the audience. It is more evident in those propaganda films. State institutions usually finance films that align with their ideologies, policies or agendas through loans, tax subsidies or facilitating more shows; such films are intended to inspire those who support those ideologies, policies or agendas, as mentioned earlier. According to respondents, most of them are made as biographies, war or sports films.

On the contrary, some respondents believed that not all sports films are coming under that general reading. They all cited the example of 'Invictus' (directed by Clint Eastwood in 2009), which showed the historical solidarity extended by the newly independent South African government towards the British people there. One of the respondents mentioned the positive critical reviews received by the famous American propaganda film 'Rocky IV' (directed by Sylvester Stallone in 1985) for its climax scene where the winner asks for ending the rivalry. But several sports films were criticized for unneeded instigation of patriotism and similar feelings. During the cold war period, both the communist bloc under the Soviet Union and the capitalist bloc under America made sports films for showing their authoritative status by badly portraying the opposite. The political rivalry between India and Pakistan is a proven commercial formula for films in both countries.

Interestingly, all these actually prove the potential of sports films in inspiring people. Films like 'Million Dollar Baby' (directed by Clint Eastwood in 2004), Chak De India and Invictus inspired several other films worldwide and public. There were news reports about the formation of women sports teams and tournaments inspired by films like 'Chak De India', 'Vennila Kabadi Kuzhu' and 'Mary Kom'. However, the case of Malayalam sports films is contrary to this. As Malayalam filmmakers were more interested in dramatic plots or concerned more about the star value of actors, they fail to bring out the spirit of sports through these films.

Respondents were almost unanimous in describing Malayalam films' failure in showcasing the 'real' sports. As Mollywood films were more dramatic in showing the relationship between characters or the emotional side of events, they fail to project the conflicts and tensions associated with the practice and performance of players. Hence those who are familiar with sports will dislike them ultimately. Different respondents pointed out different films in order to describe it. In the film 'Mahasamudram', the story is actually about the protagonist's life struggles and family issues. Even if football were not showed, it hardly makes any difference. The same issues are spotted in 'Karinkunnam 6's', 'Kavi Udheshichathu' and others.

Similarly, the respondents observed that such films in Malayalam gave more importance to the actors in them. Sports characters were more or less played by popular actors who may have a non-sport physique and body language. Even though ordinary viewers may not feel the difference, those who are familiar with sports will feel it as dull. Similar is the extensive application of slow-motion moves and using duplicates in showing actions in films. Even though these complaints are expressed generally in all Malayalam films, the issue is prominent in films dealing with sports. However, using the most suited in performing sports is realized in films like '1983' and 'Goal'. Casting suitable actors are one strategy of inspiring viewers. Even though there were several attempts at football, none of them was able to capitalize on the athletic experience of I.M. Vijayan, who is a talented actor too. Similarly, the industry used the acting skills of international professional wrestler Dara Singh very immaturely. The researchers felt it difficult to reject or disagree with the general observations provided by respondents regarding the third objective. Many critics have already shared the lack of originality in Malayalam sports films in their film reviews.

**Conclusion:** Like any other artistic creation, films represent insights into the time and society in which they are made; hence they can be used as a miniature representation of the larger complex society and to study them based on different concepts and approaches. In this paper, the researchers attempted to draw a brief picture of Malayalam sports films' evolution along with addressing the commonly raised questions. As the genre of sports films is relatively small in Mollywood, the industry does not have a long list of notable films. The absence of women based sports films itself shows the childishness of the film field here. The absence of sufficient homework in storyline and casting is easily detectable in Malayalam films. The ongoing controversy related to the genre of 'Vadakkan Pattu' films is continuing even now. The issue became more severe after the

'sneak boat race' was recognised as sports. More academic discussion is needed to settle it. However, as mentioned before, the quality of sports films itself is the most urgent issue to address here.

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