

Article

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Survival Movies in Malayalam: A Critical and Evaluative study



Carbon (2018)

Survival stories are so popular not only in world cinema but also in Malayalam. Films under the Survival drama genre generally depict the intense struggles of men facing various adversities, their endeavour to withstand natural calamities, survival struggle towards man-made disasters and wars, and individuals' selfless, courageous efforts to rescue the victims, transforming ordinary people heroes and heroines. Most of the survival movies in Malayalam are rescue dramas, which belong to another generic category, though they complement each

other. Since both are closely related and offer two perspectives, these two genres must be evaluated together for any study. This article examines the vibrancy and evolution of survival films in Malayalam cinema and the unique aesthetic experiences they create for the audience.

Survival films focus on self-defence and the struggle to sustain life, whereas rescue dramas highlight the adventures of those assigned to save others in life-threatening situations. These films showcase the daunting challenges faced by the victims fighting for

their lives and the rescuers overcoming obstacles to bring them to safety. Therefore, rescue cinema and survival cinema represent two distinct genres. While the concept of 'survival' is central to both genres, they each embody a unique aspect. Survival films depict the struggle to live in inescapable situations, whereas rescue dramas focus on the adventure of saving individuals from perilous conditions. The difference lies in the narrative viewpoint: survival films are from the perspective of those fighting to escape, while rescue dramas are from the rescuers' perspective. These films' combination of suspense, thrill, compassion and empathy makes them popular.

Malayalam cinema has always focused on social narratives, with themes of escape and rescue prominent since its inception. The first silent film in Malayalam, *Vigathakumaran* (1928, presented a narrative that revolved around the protagonist and his companion's successful endeavour to counteract the malevolent intentions of the antagonist, Bhoothanathan, who sought to abduct Chandrakumar's romantic interest. The movie underscores the hero's journey from his abduction during childhood to his eventual return to India from Sri Lanka, symbolically encapsulating a larger metaphorical battle for the existence and protection of the heroine, thereby highlighting a broader struggle for survival. However, *Vigathakumaran* and similar films do not fit the strict definition of Survival Movie. This genre became more prevalent in Malayalam during the post-eighties, focusing on themes such as deluges, earthquakes, landslides, tsunamis, political riots, man-made crises (the Mullaperiyar dam issue),

and extreme conditions like being entrapped in caves, forests, uninhabited islands, and more. Recently, Chidambaram's *Manjummal Boys* (2024), a pan-Indian hit earning wide attention, exemplifies Malayalam cinema's enduring interest in survival narratives and its ability to resonate with audiences worldwide.



Manjummal Boys (2024)

In 2006, a group of youngsters from Kochi to Kodaikanal encountered a crisis when one of its members fell deep into the Devil's Kitchen, a cave with a tragic history of 13 people dropping in, with no successful rescues. The cave became iconically famous after Kamal Haasan's Tamil film *Guna* (1991) and *Manjummal Boys*, based on this real-life incident. Subhash Chandran (Sreenath Bhasi) unexpectedly falls into the cleavage while everyone is watching. He gets entrapped in the cave with folds and curves, suffering fractures and bruises. All the efforts by the gang to rescue him are in vain. The Police, Fire & Rescue Force, and locals, knowing the risk, are virtually helpless. Finally, Kuttan (Soubin Shahir) risks his life to find Subhash, but with great difficulty, he bravely rescues him. (Kuttan, in real life, received the President's Life Gallantry Medal for Bravery.) In the climax, when the two of them get entangled in a rock-cut trap while being dragged upwards, the gang, who are

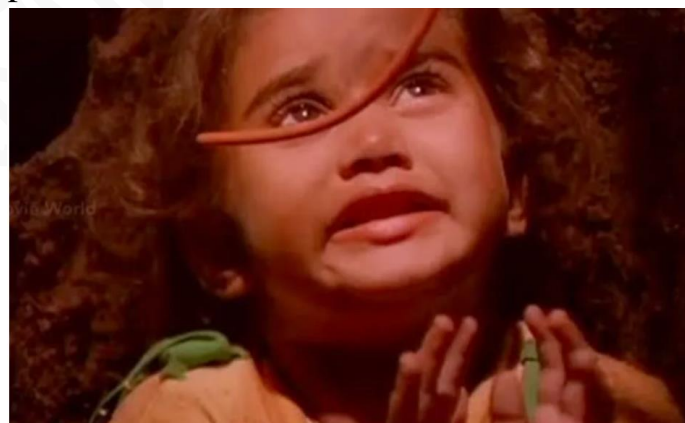
active in the tug-of-war competition in Manjummal, use the strategy of the tug of war to pull them out.

When asked, “Have you ever seen God?” Kuttan replies, “Don’t you see a light above in the darkness around you, not always, but occasionally?”¹ Ashwini P in her online review highlights this dialogue as the key sentence of the film. Subhash’s falling into the pit is the film’s interval punch. In the second half, the film reflects the salient features of the rescue/survival cinema. While detailing Kuttan's attempts to save Subhash, the film captures the essence of rescue drama. At the same time, the film also displays survival qualities in the struggle of Subhash, who is physically and mentally exhausted in the pit, struggling for his life without food or water.

The film, produced by actor-director Soubin Shahir and his father, also features stars like Lal Junior, actor Salim Kumar’s son Chandu, Sreenath Bhasi, the director’s brother Ganapathi, Deepak Parambol, and director Khalid Rahman. Released on February 22, it became the first Malayalam film to gross Rs 200 crore within weeks. According to Business Standard’s report published on May 10, 2024, the film’s gross collection touched Rs 169 crore, surpassing Rajinikanth’s *Lal Salaam* and Dhanush’s *Captain Miller*.

Manjummal Boys resonated with Tamilians due to references to the film *Guna*, written by Saab John and directed by Santhana Bharathi, with Kamal Haasan in the lead. Malayalees always admired this film, especially Kamal Haasan’s superhit song *Kanmani Anpodu Kaathalan Naanezhuthum Kadithame*. According to Chidambaram and

his team, *Manjummal Boys* was a tribute to *Guna*, and hence, the music was remixed and included in the film. In Tamil Nadu, *the Manjummal Boys* became a big sensation. The reason is that Tamilians also share similar sentiments towards *Guna* and the song, and above all, more than half of the film takes place in Tamil Nadu, and the dialogues are in Tamil. The film was primarily shot in Kerala, where the climate and greenery of *Guna Caves* were artificially recreated after extensive research, thanks to a considerable investment. Shaiju Khalid filmed it using cutting-edge equipment, and the set of *Guna Cave*, built at Perumbavoor, near Kochi, for Rs 45 lakh under Art Director Ajayan Chalissery’s craftsmanship, later became a place of attraction for a while.



Malootty (1990)

Years ago, before technology advanced and film budgets soared, a similar rescue film in Malayalam became a hit. Written by John Paul and directed by Bharathan, the film *Malootty* was released in 1990. Jayaram played the male lead, with Urvashi in his opposite. However, the real surprise was Baby Shyamili, the younger sister of Baby Shalini, a child prodigy who played the title role.

Inspired by actual incidents, the film was set when borewells became widespread in Kerala. There were at least two incidents of children accidentally falling into deep borewell pits and being rescued. These incidents received significant media attention, like the recent Uttarkashi tunnel rescue. Motivated by these events, John Paul wrote the story of *Malootty*. The film follows Unnikrishnan (Jayaram), who, while on leave from his job abroad, goes on a picnic with his wife Raji (Urvashi) and daughter. While playing with a puppy, Malootty falls into a borewell pit in a dam sight. The film's second half focuses on the rescue attempts to save her from the pit, transforming it into a thrilling rescue narrative. The film also starred K.P.A.C. Lalitha, Devan, Nedumudi Venu, Bahadur, Sreenath, and Innocent. Produced by Haripothan under Supriya Productions and released on February 2, 1990, *Malootty* fetched Shyamili the State Award for Best Child Artist.

In an era without enough technical facilities or high-cost sets, cinematographer Venu managed to shoot numerous adventurous scenes for *Malootty* within its confines. It should be noted that Venu was the cameraman for *Guna*. Kamal Haasan has often recounted the perilous adventure Venu undertook, carrying a heavy camera on his shoulders with a rope tied around his waist as he filmed scenes in the caves. Three decades later, when *Manjummal Boys*, another similar rescue story, became a hit, it reminded us of *Malootty*.

Deluge and After

Cultures worldwide have worshipped the five elements and nature in various forms, and the

evolution of the universe is deeply rooted in these elements and natural forces. Anthropology and philosophy intertwine in this context. Natural phenomena such as lightning, thunderstorms, floods, earthquakes, and landslides led humans to perceive these forces as superhuman and worship them out of fear. As faith grew stronger alongside culture, this reverence became embedded in religious practices and rituals. Different manifestations of cosmic forces were established by the tribal chiefs, giving rise to rituals and tribal arts. This cultural evolution took place both in riverine civilisations and in forest societies. As humans developed language, writing, and theatre, the respect for cosmic forces remained a central motivation, inspiration, and theme.

Malayalam horror films frequently feature themes of superstitious powers and plagues. As in literature, natural phenomena are depicted as manifestations of supernatural anger in these films. Stock footage of natural disasters (compiled, edited, and recorded from various sources for repeated use) was commonly available in Madras for its depiction. Hollywood has a long history of producing films on natural calamities, like *Earthquake*, *Twister*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Dante's Peak*, *San Andreas*, *The Impossible*, *Bait*, *Flood*, *Avalanche*, *10.5*, *A Natural Disaster*, *Aftershock*, *Deluge*. and numerous others, Malayalam cinema has begun to explore themes related to natural disasters and their impact on human lives quite recently. The reason may be due to the region's moderate climate and geography, which has shielded it from severe man-made conflicts and had little impact on direct warfare. Moreover, the Malayalam film industry has

lacked the financial resources to produce large-scale disaster films.

With global warming and its associated phenomena altering Kerala's climate, cloudbursts, heavy rains, and flash floods have become more frequent. Furthermore, political unrest and communal tensions have intensified, adding to the region's challenges. Thus, the evolution of Malayalam cinema to incorporate natural disaster themes marks a significant development, reflecting historical and contemporary realities.



Vellam (1985)

The first Malayalam film to address a natural disaster was *Vellam* (Water, 1985), scripted by M T Vasudevan Nair and directed by Hariharan. The film was set against the backdrop of the Periyar floods 1924, infamously referred to as the 'Deluge of the 90s,' which had almost submerged all the areas of Eranadu, Kerala. Based on a novel by N.N. Pisharody and produced by actor Devan, the film faced financial difficulties that delayed its production for five years. The plot revolves around Kodanadu reserve forests and tells the story of two generations. Mathunni (Madhu), who migrates from central Travancore, clears forests and establishes a large industry in the valley. The film portrays the rare friendship between Mathunni and Krishnanunni, aka Unni Pillai

(Prem Nazir), an accountant from Kovilakam. Krishnanunni falls in love with the Ilayathamburatti (Younger Princess, Unnimaya played by K.R. Vijaya) of the collapsed Kumkumam feudal *tharavadu*, with support from Mathunni.

The *theme of the deluge* is deeply woven into the dialogues, highlighting the river's nature, floods, and love. Mathunni gains wealth by cutting rafts from the forest at the hilltop, transporting them down the river, and selling them. The film's adventure scenes depicting this journey are visually notable. During heavy rains, Bapu, a local goon, confronts Mathunni. Their physical encounter also occurs amidst the rain. It was heavily raining outside while Unnimaya took her lover's baby. The story takes a dramatic turn when it starts raining as Ambika (Menaka), the daughter of Unni and Unnimaya, is forbidden by Mathunni from falling in love with Thampi (Sattar), his arch-rival, who is a labour union leader. Torrential day-and-night rains lead to deluge, engulfing the eastern regions. The forest and its surroundings become submerged, and the temple is destroyed. The film vividly portrays the efforts of the workers and their families to escape from the godown, with Mathunni at the forefront of the rescue operations.

Though many villagers go to save Unnimaya, who is stranded in her ancestral home, she refuses to leave. Under Thampi's leadership, they make another attempt to rescue her at night but are unable to cross the river due to the heavy undercurrents. At last, despite being sick and old, Unni sets out on an adventurous mission to save his lady love, but the boat sinks in the middle of the river. Mathunni and Thampi rescue them, but Unni

succumbs to death. Before passing away, he gets some water from Ambika, and everybody is shocked to hear from Unnimaya that Krishnanunni is Ambika's biological father! The flood disrupts the lives of many characters. As the floodwaters recede, their lives take on a new beginning.

The great flood in the climax was picturised using miniature photography and available optical techniques. Remarkably, the film features scenes of a boat sinking in the river, achieved without the modern technology of underwater cameras. Actual flood scenes were also incorporated, making it a significant achievement in Malayalam cinema at the time. S. Konnanatt was the art director, while Melly Irani was the cinematographer. Indoor portions were shot at Navodaya Studio in Kakkanad, Kochi and Prasad Studios in Chennai. Hariharan's directorial brilliance elevated *Vellam* to an above-average spectacle.



Dam 999 (2011)

In Hollywood, the genre known as 'Disaster Movies' frequently produces films that explore themes like conflicts between nature and humanity, wars with alien powers, interhuman life, nuclear war fears, and apocalyptic nightmares. In contrast,

Malayalam cinema lacks diversity in genres. One significant Indian contribution to this genre is *Dam 999*, directed by Sohan Roy. Released in 2011, *Dam 999* followed Hollywood stereotypes and faced the limitations of being an English film made in India. Despite this, the film gained attention in Kerala's socio-political and ecological context and remains relevant in the context of potential water-related disasters.

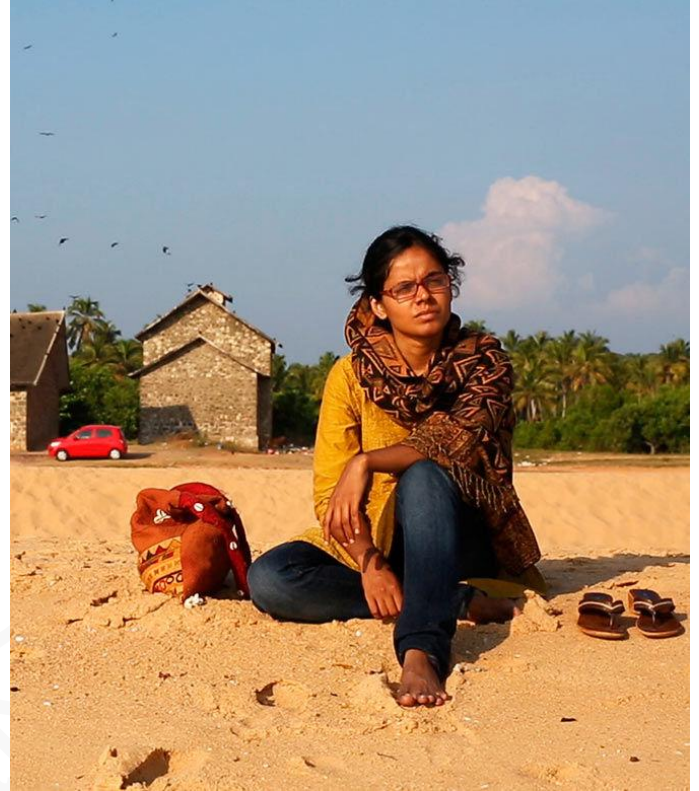
Dam 999 warns about the environmental consequences in the name of development. The political dimension is evident in the film's title, with the imaginary dam representing the Mullapperiyar Dam, a contentious issue in Kerala-Tamil Nadu politics. The Mullapperiyar Dam has a 999-year lease agreement with Tamil Nadu, which adds relevance to the movie title.

Dam 999 is structured as a parallel narrative of three subplots through nine characters representing the Navarasas. Vinay (Vinay Rai), a sailor, returns to his ancestral home in Kerala after many years with his diabetic son, Samu (Jeeneet Rath). Vinay is the son of Sankaran (Rajat Kapoor), a practitioner of traditional indigenous medicine and a noted astrologer. Meera (Vimala Raman), his adopted daughter, has inherited knowledge from him, including Siddha Vaidya. Sankaran, who is aware of Meera's love and interest in Vinay, does not favour their relationship. Through his astrological powers, he foresees that if Meera had any physical contact with Vinay, it would result in some natural disaster. When he reveals this to Meera, she moves away from Vinay, and Vinay marries Sandra (Linda Arsenio), a TV reporter, and goes to work on the ship. His captain, Joshua, was the son of

Vinay's native English Mayor during British rule. Dorai (Ashish Vidyarthi), a Tamilian who kills Mayor John and owns his disabled daughter Maria (Jala Pickering), is now the mayor. A dam built by the British 999 years ago is a prominent political/social topic of discussion now, as it may collapse at any moment due to old age and substandard logging. Dorai, without taking it at face value, seeks to take political/economic advantage of his own self-interest/

Unable to come to terms with Sandra, Vinay returns home with the intention of curing his son's illness with his father and becomes close to Meera again. It is also a rebirth for Meera, who is married to a fool named Mark (Harry Key). But Sankaran, who is a silent witness to their closeness, predicts that on September 9, 2009, at the very moment of a significant astrological Navagraha shift in the world, the long-lived dam will burst, and his ancestral home will be destroyed in the floods. He was trying to perform a pooja with a hard vow to eliminate evil. As one of the tunnel walls of the dam begins to leak, Sandra informs Vinay, and together with the captain, they set out to repair it. Meanwhile, Sankaran's pooja continues at his ancestral home. As predicted by Shankaran, a massive flood occurs, and many, including himself, who refuse to leave the pooja room lose their lives. *Dam 999* concludes with Meera accepting her fate as a widow, while Sandra, putting aside their differences, decides to unite. The film's theme combines the exploitation of nature with superstition. The use of graphics somewhat captures the horror of the dam's collapse. Despite its socially relevant subject, the film's adherence to market norms raises

doubts about its aesthetic brilliance. Dorai's villainy detracts from the plot's seriousness. Nonetheless, the script was curated by the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for its ecological significance.



Oraalppokkam (2014)

Oraalppokkam (Six Feet Height, 2014), written and directed by Sanal Kumar Sasidharan, was a film that tried to portray the intensity of a natural disaster philosophically, set against the backdrop of the devastating floods, landslides and earthquakes that rocked Uttarakhand after a cloudburst. The director envisions the journey of the protagonist Mahindran (Prakash Bare) as a shocking spectacle of the inevitable tragedy created by human greed and arrogance at the border districts of the Himalayas up to Kedar. When Mahindran arrives in Kedar searching for Maya, he is confronted with the heart-wrenching aftermath of nature's devastation. When creation and condition are rejected, only destruction remains. The director

brought its intensity to the audience through real footage of the actual cloudburst and the deluge that followed. However, the film did not achieve a rescue/survival dimension except to make tragedy a cause for introspection.



Roudram (2018)

Jayaraj, the national award-winning filmmaker from Kerala, is the only one who has made two great films on the floods. Both were based on two works by Jnanpith winner Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. The first was *Vellappokkathil* (In Deluge, 2007), which won the National Award in the short film category, and the second was *Roudram* (Fury, 2018), one of his anthologies based on Navarasas. *Vellappokkathil*, produced under Doordarshan's initiative to visualise literary works, is a heart-warming short story in the backdrop of the devastating floods of 1924. Districts, including Alappuzha and Idukki, were completely immersed during the floods. When the locals came in a boat and evicted the Chennan parayan, along with his pregnant wife and children whose house was submerged, only a pet dog was left on top of the hut. The people in the boat were not ready to save it as there was no room in it. The film is about the tragic plight of the poor dog. Thankappan and Bindu were in the starcast.

“The biggest challenge of the day was where to shoot. An entire village should be

depicted in water. We took it to the lake and set it up. In the middle of the lake, a hut top and top of coconut trees were installed. It was in a place called Kaipuram. The villagers picked up the coconut saplings and placed them in the middle of the lake. Only the roof and the dog on top can be seen. It will be the first film set in the middle of the lake.” recalls Jayaraj.⁴ “There is a great element of humanity in Thakazhi's story. We can tell the horror of the tragedy through a tiny dog or a bird cub. It's beautiful when a great thing is said through a small expression... It indicates that there was a great disaster. The man leaves his beloved dog behind. Its life is as important as that of man. In the end, when the water recedes, Chenna Parayan comes back. A dog with an unidentified shape is lying dead. Then someone asked whether it was his dog, and he replied, “I don't think so.”

M.J. Radhakrishnan was the cinematographer who created magic with his camera lens. Commenting on the Film, critic Dr C S Venkateswaran writes: “The film, which has won many awards, recreates the story in a very simple and minimalist manner. Jayaraj's film follows the story, which revolves around the relationship between the landlord, the tenant, the soil, the man, the man and the animal. Throughout the film, a colourless, pale light comes when the dark clouds, the rain-drenched sky, and the water layer that stretches endlessly beneath it all combine. The centre of view is a dog abandoned by everyone and left alone in the leaf house. The shadow and light produced by the rain and wind, the sun, the clouds, the birds and animals, etc., in the waterways add a desperate and lonely sadness to the place. The loneliness of the life that nature has

abandoned is lying there. But what is before us here is the abandonment of man, which is even more intolerable. Nature abandons man, and man abandons the dog that he has guarded up to now.”⁵

“Ours is a time between two floods. The floods of 1924 were confined to some districts. There were no dams like this then. There’s only rain. Naturally, the river overflowed and submerged Kuttanad. Today, floods have affected many other places more than Kuttanad. Man himself became a great victim of man-made reforms. Two times, two floods, a period in between, the way we have seen nature... These are issues that we need to think about.”

Scripted by himself, Jayaraj’s *Roudram* is based on the 2018 floods. During the floods, many reports of elderly couples being stranded in Chengannur and other places in central Travancore, unable to step out. Jayaraj wanted to portray the impact of the floods, which focused on such an incident. *Roudram* had Renji Panicker as the male lead and KPAC Leela as the heroine.

Narayanan (Renji), a former scientist with dementia, and his wife Marykutty (Leela), a retired teacher, are forced to return home from the airport when their flight is cancelled due to floods. As water floods the first floor of their house, they escape to the ceiling. Narayanan, oblivious to the situation, climbs onto the ceiling to escape. Two days later, when Marykutty’s decomposed body floats in the water, he comes downstairs. The director vividly portrays the horror of the floods through the visuals of KPAC Leela, who is seen through a small hole in the ceiling. The rising water in the house is depicted as realistic. The film also delves into

the two characters’ nostalgia, internal conflicts, and reciprocity. Nikhil S. Praveen expertly captures the camera work for *Roudram*, conveying the flood’s terror, depth, and scale. *Roudram* received numerous accolades at international film festivals, including Best Actor and Best Screenplay at the Madrid International Film Festival, Best Cameraman at the Beijing International Film Festival, and recognition at the Cairo International Film Festival.



Moonnaam Pralayam (2018)

Moonnaam Pralayam (The Third Deluge, 2021), directed by Ratheesh Raju, is again a film based on the 2018 deluge. The film narrates the life of ordinary people in Kainakari, a village in the backwaters of Kuttanad, on August 15, 16 and 17. Floods hit Kainakari in 1342, 1924 and 2018, hence the title. The film was shot in 13 days. Saikumar, Anil Murali, Aristo Suresh, Kookkil Raghavan, Sadanandan Chepparambu, Sanuja Somnath, Bindu Panicker, Sandra Nair and Kulappuli Leela, etc., were in the star cast. Ratheesh dealt with the political, social, and communal divisions that arise during natural calamities like floods and other conflicts.

The plot of *Moonnaam Pralayam* was based on the flood relief camp in Kainakari. For Kuttanad, which floods have not spared, relief camps are a part of life. Scripted by K Wilson, the film combines real-life incidents from the flood relief camps. Many of the actual flood survivors appear as characters. The story focuses on a super-rich businessman (Saikumar) who struggles to come to terms with life in the camp and is devastated by the floods. Although inanimate, such as radio and candles, the film's visual care is artistically utilised as the spirits and metaphors of camp life. Razaq Kunnath is the cinematographer. The story unfolds through conflict-ridden moments of floods, grudges and the fear of floods and is in an entirely different mood. The shooting took place in Adimali and Thodupuzha. The climax was shot in Kallarkutty Dam. The crew had to build massive sets in Adimali to capture the intensity of the floods.

The 2018 floods in Kerala served as a transformative experience, turning ordinary individuals into superhuman saviours. During these testing times, rich and poor shared communal meals and slept on mats, erasing social divides. Weeks were spent praying for loved ones and the state. It was a poignant period when the marginalised fishermen folk emerged as the saviours of Kerala. Even when divine intervention seemed futile, human efforts persisted daily to rescue those in need. The 2018 floods remain an indelible memory for contemporary Kerala. Director Jude Anthony Joseph, who lived through the tragedy, created the film *2018-Everyone is a Hero* (2023) to immortalise the human virtues that emerged during the disaster. Through his film, Jude reawakened the memories of the

devastating floods that haunted the Malayalees. *2018* became one of the most poignant and emotionally stirring survival films in Malayalam Cinema, earning domestic and international recognition, including the honour of being India's official entry to the Oscars!



2018-Everyone is a Hero (2023)

The film follows Anoop (Tovino Thomas), who deserts the army and works as an assistant in the shop of the blind Dasan (Indrans), with aspirations of crossing the sea. His girlfriend, Manju (Tanvi Ram), accompanies him. Similarly, Nixon (Asif Ali) aspires to be a model, rejecting the idea of becoming a fisherman like his father and brother. His father, Mathachan (Lal), and elder brother, Winston (Naran), are adventurous fishermen who support him unconditionally. Shaji Punnoose (Kunchacko Boban) is a government official struggling to balance his duties with family life, including his wife, Zerina (Shivada) and daughter.

2018 revolves around the dramatic events that unfold as water from the dam, combined with a cloudburst, floods the lives of various individuals facing unique challenges. The unannounced release of water at night devastates many lives and dreams. Anoop eventually emerges as the saviour with a raft. At a time when state resources and

technology are insufficient, fishermen familiar with the sea's heartbeat lead the rescue operations. Risking their own lives, they save countless individuals and transport them to relief camps. The disaster evokes a sense of compassion among Malayalees. Anoop, who deserts the army and later becomes a national hero, tragically sacrifices his life while rescuing a differently abled child and their family. The film poignantly captures the collective human spirit and the profound impact of the 2018 floods on the people of Kerala.

Flood, underwater, and VFX scenes shot for 2018 were spectacular and technically brilliant. The flood scenes and rescue operations were shot in a 12-acre set at Maravanthuruthu in Vaikom. The real flood was similarly captured for the film. This is the first time in Malayalam cinema since *Padayottam* (1982) that such an elaborate set has been erected in an open space. Akhil George's cinematography is the highlight of the film.



Ullazhukku (2024)

In contrast to other films based on floods, *Ullazhukku* (The Undercurrents, 2024), directed by Christo Tomy, explores the psychological impact of the deluge on the characters' minds. The director places the flood at the centre of the narrative, focusing

on a Christian family in Kuttanad as the setting. The film depicts the complex relationship between Anju (Parvathy Theruthoth), a salesgirl at a textile shop, and her mother-in-law, Leelamma (Urvashi).

Like the film *Vellam*, *Ullazhukku* also addresses themes of paternal absence. As Krishnanunni's paternity is revealed posthumously in the flood relief camp in *Vellam*, Anju grapples with the secret of her unborn child's actual father after the death of her 'husband' Thomas Kutty (Prashanth Murali) during the floods. Thomas, who had encephalitis, married Anju without disclosing his condition. He distances Anju from her former love, only to fall ill soon after, leaving her feeling betrayed. During the floods, water inundates their home, leading to Thomas Kutty's death. Leelamma discovers Anju's pregnancy while delaying the funeral due to the flood. Believing the child to be Thomas Kutty's, she is unaware of the true paternity. The director meticulously portrays the inner conflicts between Anju and Leelamma as the truth unfolds. Despite Leelamma's offers of jewellery and land, Anju stands firm. When Anju discovers that Rajeev (Arjun Radhakrishnan), the man she loves, is more interested in her property than in her, she decides to leave him and stay with Leelamma. The film vividly captures the characters' inner turmoil against the backdrop of the actual floods. The director skilfully uses the rising water levels outside to mirror the escalating tension between Leelamma and Anju and between Anju and Rajeev. Shehnad Jalai's cinematography is crucial in depicting the impact of the flood. As the name suggests, *Ullazhukku* uses the external flood as a metaphor for internal conflict, focusing on

human efforts to navigate emotional upheavals caused by inner transformations. The film and the director focus on the characters' psychological survival rather than merely the physical survival from the floods.

In all these films, the visualisation of the emotional and mental tensions caused by the tragedy is focussed and followed upon rather than its visual technicality. These films have narrated the consequences of tragedy on human life.

Life in the Dune

Desert survival films have long been a significant genre in world cinema, showcasing adventure, hardship, and thrilling conflicts. “All the lives that we have not experienced are just myths for us,” Benyamin wrote in his novel *Aadujeevitham* (The Goat Life). The novel *Aadujeevitham* was a narrative of incredible life and survival rather than the myth that an ordinary Malayalee had to face in the desert to make these lines more relevant. Like its name, the novel is the story of the isolated life of a human being among a herd of sheep in a desert in the Middle East. The story of the journey of survival across the dunes is only a small part. However, based on this novel, the movie *Aadujeevitham* (The Goat Life, 2023), written and directed by Blessy after six years of hard work, is an adventurous survival journey of three people through the sand sea. Prithviraj's stunning performance as the protagonist is one of the most significant strengths of the film *Aadujeevitham*. In *Aadujeevitham*, he delivers an unparalleled performance that is so intricate. Maintaining the continuity of Najeeb's facial expressions and physical distress, such as a fractured leg, throughout

the extended filming period is a considerable challenge for any actor.



Aadujeevitham (2023)

Since the release of *Chemmeen* (1966), Malayalam cinema has frequently faced criticism that film adaptations fail to do justice to their literary sources. Literature allows readers to imagine and read between the lines, whereas cinema completes it through visual representation. But *Aadujeevitham* movie is not mere a visualisation of Benyamin's work but a visual interpretation by its director. Notably, the film's brilliant visual narrative has gained national acclaim, earning a selection for the Indian Panorama at the IFFI 2024.

Director Blessy consciously accepted and omitted certain plotlines while translating the novel into a movie. This selective assimilation highlights the restraint exercised by a filmmaker attuned to the nuances of the visual media. In the past, literary adaptations such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Vidheyan*, based on Zachariah's short story, have sparked controversy. Zachariah alleged that the film deviated from the spirit of his work, to which Adoor responded, “This is my film, inspired by a work as a filmmaker.” While no such contention existed between the novelist and director over *Aadujeevitham*, it was extensively discussed on social media.

Blessy, like Adoor, can confidently assert that the film is his creative vision. The scenes omitted from the original work reflect Blessy's creative decisions as a filmmaker. The script of *Aadujeevitham* reveals many instances of Blessy's craftsmanship. From the characters' arrival at Dubai airport in search of work to the concluding scenes where a cruel Arab employer denies being Najeeb's sponsor, the script skilfully extracts and adapts situations from the novel to suit the cinematic narrative. In *Aadujeevitham*, director Blessy surpasses the scriptwriter Blessy. Crafting a compelling film with just two characters and the endless sand dunes over 2.17 hours is no small feat. Blessy achieves this through artful shot divisions, camera movements, and visual composition. The scene where Najeeb, unable to walk with the departing goat flock, witnesses a lamb crying and reuniting with the flock exemplifies the director's brilliance. The decision not to subtitle the Arabic dialogue when the protagonist and his friend are trapped with a merciless sponsor in the desert demonstrates Blessy's hold on his narrative. This choice effectively communicates the characters' emotions to the audience without relying on complete dialogue comprehension.

Aadujeevitham distinguishes itself in Malayalam cinema both thematically and technically. Its depiction of sand snakes and sandstorms is world-class, showcasing KS Sunil's exceptional cinematography. The production design, art direction, and makeup significantly contribute to the film's authenticity. The efforts of costume designers Ranjith Ambadi and Steffi Xavier are commendable, ensuring that the audience sees Najeeb rather than Prithviraj. The

contributions of sound designer Resul Pookutty and editor Sreekar Prasad enhance the film's quality. AR Rahman's evocative background score adds to the film's impact. However, the arrangement of the theme music during a night scene, where Najeeb recognises Hakim's song from a distance, could have been more distinct to ensure the audience quickly identifies the singer. Overall, *Aadujeevitham* demonstrates the collaborative efforts of talented technicians and artists, resulting in a cinematic masterpiece that combines technical excellence with a profound narrative.

Aadujeevitham bears a striking resemblance to contemporary movies from the world, such as *Its Sira* (Ke Tasruma 2023), a French-German Senegalese joint venture written and directed by Apollon Trayora, and *Me Captain*, an Italy-Belgium-French co-production directed by Oscar-winning actor Matteo Garrone. Both films were showcased at the IFFI and IFFK 2023. The experiences of teenagers Saidu and Moosa in *Me Captain* and *Sira*'s survival adventures in *Its Sira* share thematic similarities with that of Najeeb's of *Aadujeevitham*. The journeys of Saidu and Moosa closely mirror the desert experiences of Najeeb and Hakeem. Both sets of characters seek better living conditions through extensive travel. The teenage protagonists of *Me Captain* dream of a better life in Italy, willingly facing the challenges of illegal immigration from Senegal. In contrast, Najeeb (Prithviraj) and Hakeem (KR Gokul) are deceived by their sponsor. Saidu and Moosa bravely confront the sea, like navigating a sand sea. Saidu (Saidu Sarr) loses Moosa (Mustafa Fall) to the Libyan

underworld, only to reunite with him months later in Tripoli. In *Aadujeevitham*, Najeeb's refuge is facilitated by Ibrahim Kadiri, a friend of Hakim who faces similar persecution in a distant sheep herd like Hakeem's death in *Aadujeevitham*, an elderly mother in *Its Sira* perishes during a desert trek.

Sira's fate in *Its Sira* is even more tragic. During her family's desert journey to reach her groom, they are attacked by Islamic militants. Sira witnesses her father and brother's murder and is brutally raped by the militant leader Yere. Abandoned in the desert, she struggles to survive, eventually living in a cave near the terror camp. Pregnant by Yere, Sira relies on the mercy of other captive women for sustenance. Her story centres on her quest for liberation, culminating in a women's revolt at the terror base. Sira (Nifisatu Sisse) epitomises survival by consuming raw scorpions to nourish her unborn child. All these films demonstrate cinema's narrative power in rendering the incredible believable. These films exemplify how cinema can convincingly portray extraordinary survival narratives.

Films such as *Gaddama* (Servant 2011), written by Girish Kumar and starring Kamal Kavya Madhavan; *Two Men* (2022), directed by Satish Kumar and starring Irshad and M.A. Nishad; and *Iyer in Arabia* (2024), starring M.A. Nishad, Mukesh, and Dhyani Sreenivasan, share thematic elements with *Aadujeevitham*. These films depict the anguish of characters isolated in desert sands, reflecting their struggles for survival.

Due to its geographical peculiarities, for the majority in Kerala, natural calamities such as landslides are often seen as fleeting

news that does not significantly impact their everyday lives. However, the film *Malayan Kunju* (The Mountain Child, 2022) vividly depicts the horror and pain experienced by those directly affected by such disasters. The film is also a poignant reminder of the devastating memories associated with the massive disasters in Kavalappara, Puthumala, Mundakkai and Churalappara, in Kerala that wiped out hundreds of lives.



Malayan Kunju (2022)

Malayan Kunju focuses on Anil Kumar, aka Anikuttan (Fahadh Faasil), whose life is upended by a landslide. The film marks the directorial debut of Sajimon Prabhakaran and features a commendable performance by Fahadh Faasil. The film's emphasis on sound and visual effects, complemented by A.R. Rahman's music, enhances the viewer's immersion. At the same time, Mahesh Narayanan's cinematography captures the disaster's intensity, making *Malayan Kunju* a compelling survival thriller.

Anikuttan, an electronics repairer, lives with his mother in the village terrains of Idukki. His life is marked by monotony and unresolved family tragedies. The film's first half portrays his estranged relationships with his neighbours, which escalate when a baby's cry distracts and disturbs him. This sets the

stage for the film's transition into survival drama following a catastrophic landslide. The plot centres on Anikuttan's daring, life-threatening efforts to rescue himself and the child trapped underground. The film concludes with Anikuttan's introspection and transformation following the disaster.

Malayan Kunju is noteworthy, with a strong cast that includes Arjun Asokan, Rajisha Vijayan, Indrans, Jaffer Idukki, and Irshad. The film is largely Fahadh's 'one-man show,' with his physical performance mirroring the dedication seen in Prithviraj's role in *Aadujeevitham*. The second half of the film set 40 feet underground, is a testament to Fahadh's commitment. The script, written by Mahesh Narayanan, prioritises sound and visual storytelling over dialogue, a choice that effectively conveys the impending disaster's tension. Music by A.R. Rahman and the realistic visuals by Mahesh Narayanan create a gripping atmosphere that resonates with viewers, making it particularly challenging for those with claustrophobia to watch.

Malayan Kunju exemplifies how tragedy and trauma can transform a limited setting into a rich narrative landscape. The performances of Indrans as Uncle Surendran and Jaffer Idukki as Fahadh's father add emotional depth to the story. The film highlights the dangers residents face in high-range areas during the rains and prompts reflection on human and environmental interactions. It conveys a powerful message about the resilience of the human spirit, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, and underscores the enduring value of hope and perseverance.

Helen (2019) follows an entrapment story that unfolds over two days and tells the

tale of a young woman who works part-time at a fast-food restaurant after completing her nursing degree. One night, she gets trapped in a super-refrigerated storeroom. The film captures her desperate attempts to escape and her father's efforts to find her. *Helen's* story is a testament to human resilience and ingenuity in extreme conditions. The narrative, driven by Anna Ben's compelling performance, transitions from a family drama to a gripping thriller. The excellent make-up and art direction add to the film's credibility. Helen's survival is fuelled by her unyielding will to live and her resourcefulness. The film won the National Award for Best Debut Director and received a special award from the state jury.



Helen (2019)

Maradona (2018), directed by debutant Vishnu Narayanan, too follows a storyline akin to *Helen*. *Maradona* (Tovino Thomas), a young man with a criminal background, seeks refuge in a relative's house in Bengaluru. The film explores his unexpected experiences, loneliness, realisation, and survival. *Maradona* delves into the protagonist's transformation during his days of isolation, especially when he and a pet dog are accidentally locked inside the flat. Tovino's nuanced performance, combined with careful direction and editing, makes the film a notable

entry in the survival genre. The film stands out in the survival genre, bearing some resemblance to Aashiq Abu's *Mayanadhi* (2017) due to its thematic similarities. However, *Maradona* is distinctly different from *Mathan*, the hero of *Mayanadhi*, in terms of personality and narrative treatment.



Mayanadhi (2017)

The film's unique approach to character development and diverse narrative techniques distinguish it from conventional storytelling. The director effectively establishes the character's unpredictability and the film through the opening scene, depicting Tovino's character in his criminal milieu. The protagonist's character is further developed through interactions, such as the 'Encounter' with a young girl. *Maradona*'s unrestrained display of violence, even in the presence of vulnerable individuals (children, pets, elderly neighbours), suggests that the film could pivot to unforeseen dangers at any moment. The film's realistic depiction of a criminal's life and repentance aligns with recurring themes in various art forms and cinema. While not fully achieving this thematic depth, *Maradona* explores how criminals ultimately become victims through the experiences of *Maradona* and his associate, *Sudhi*.

The casting is well-suited, with Tito Wilson portraying *Maradona*'s accomplice

Sudhi, Chemban Vinod as *Martin* and Nistar Ahmed as the politician. Cinematographer Deepak D. Menon effectively supports Vishnu Narayan's vision, while Saiju Sreedharan's editing complements the film's rhythm. The camera focuses primarily on the characters' performances, minimising movements in action sequences to maintain tension.

Although they do not strictly adhere to the conventional definition of survival films, several works in Malayalam cinema share thematic elements with the genre. Amal Neerad's *Varathan* (2018) narrates the story of an ordinary man compelled to protect his life and the lives of his loved ones from anti-social elements. Similarly, Ratnakumar's Tamil-Malayalam film *Aada* (2019) explores the plight of a young woman trapped in an uninhabited building under dire circumstances.

Carbon (2018), directed by cinematographer Venu, with Fahadh Faasil and Mamta Mohandas in the lead roles, is yet another entrapment thriller that follows the adventures of a young man trapped in a forest. *Carbon* narrates the story of Sibi (Fahadh Faasil), a man determined to fortify his life by pursuing his dreams. Sibi is willing to undertake any adventure or deceit to achieve success, living by the philosophy, "What is life without fantasy?" His life is characterised by a constant quest for shortcuts to wealth. Fahadh adeptly portrays this impatient and hasty character with that ease.

Sibi's journey takes him to the deserted forest edifice, where he has been appointed caretaker. He unexpectedly encounters Sameera (Mamta), who enjoys wandering through the forest to escape life's burdens.

She draws Sibi into an age-old tale involving Tipu Sultan's treasure, believed to be buried in the forest. Sameera leaves behind a red mark on the road during their adventurous trek, pondering its future use. *Carbon* intricately weaves a narrative of adventure, greed, and survival, with Venu's directorial brilliance bringing the forest's enigmatic beauty and dangers to life. The film's exploration of Sibi's internal and external struggles against the backdrop of the woods creates a compelling and immersive viewing experience. The cast is supported by Sphadikam George, Kochu Preman, Praveena, Manikandan Achari, Dileesh Pothan, Nedumudi Venu, Soubin Shahir and Vijayaraghavan. The cinematography by KU Mohanan enhances the film's visual appeal.

These films, along with Ajith Kumar's *Eeda* (2018), which is set against the backdrop of Kerala's violent and intolerant political landscape, and *Chaver* (2023), written by Joy Mathew and directed by Tinu Pappachan, depict the struggles of individuals in extreme situations. Despite their thematic similarities to survival films, these works do not fit the established genre definition. Instead, they focus on the resilience and resourcefulness of characters facing extraordinary challenges.

The Pandemic and thereafter

Smallpox has historically been depicted as a social problem, as seen in works like M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Asuravithu* (1968) and *ARM* (2024). However, Aashiq Abu's *Virus* (2019) marked a significant departure by being the first Malayalam film to explore the survival genre within the framework of a medical thriller. *Virus* is based on the first

'Nipah' outbreak in Kerala, which preceded the COVID-19 pandemic that confined the world to their homes. Before the Nipah outbreak in Kozhikode, Keralites were more familiar with the term 'epidemic' rather than 'pandemic.' The Nipah virus, known for its rapid transmission through fruit bats, posed a significant threat due to its pandemic potential.



Virus (2019)

Directed by Aashiq Abu and produced jointly by Aashiq and Reema, *Virus* narrates the story of Kerala's battle for survival during the Nipah outbreak. The script, penned by Muhsin Parari, Sharafu, and Suhas, portrays the collective efforts of the health department, health workers, officials, social workers, people's representatives, and ambulance drivers. The film highlights their sacrifice, courage, and selfless service in effectively combating the pandemic. Shot entirely in and around Kozhikode Medical College, the film provides a realistic depiction of the crisis.

Virus showcases the heroism of ordinary individuals, exemplified by Sister Lini, who sacrificed her life during the outbreak. The film, classified as a medical or survival thriller, imaginatively recreates the period rather than merely documenting events. *Virus* employs a narrative style reminiscent of the Hollywood film *Contagion* (2011), effectively evoking the atmosphere of

a pandemic through its storytelling. The film underscores Malayalees' resilience and collaborative spirit in the face of a life-threatening outbreak.

Virus begins on a typical day at Kozhikode Medical College Hospital. The film's first half is characterised by its realistic portrayal, while the second half transitions into an emotional thriller. The narrative captures the people's experiences of Kozhikode during the Nipah virus outbreak. Soubin's portrayal of Unnikrishnan is particularly noteworthy, contributing significantly to the film's visual approach. Although the film has been widely accepted as depicting Kerala's collective resistance against a micro-organism capable of devastating society, critics have had mixed opinions on its emotional resonance as a work of art.

The cast includes Rima Kallingal as nurse Lini, Revathy as the health minister, Tovino Thomas as the district collector, Poornima Indrajith as the health secretary, and Dr. Sanjeev Kumar as another health official. Kunchacko Boban, playing Suresh Rajan, and Parvathy Theruvath as Anu, also deliver performances that do justice to their real-life characters. Indrajith, Joju George, Asif Ali, and Sreenath Bhasi also contribute significantly. Director Aashiq Abu skilfully navigates the narrative, salvaging it from becoming a docu-fiction. The cinematography by Rajeev Ravi and the background score by Sushin Shyam greatly enhance the film's impact.

Virus encapsulates the life-and-death struggle of health workers and activists against an invisible enemy, as noted by Dhanya K Vilayil in her online review, "A

people who fought together for a single cause—human beings with the willpower to survive adversity. Therefore, Aashiq Abu and his team deserve to be congratulated for their willingness to make a film about the life story of Nipah warriors, who deserve a salute. *The virus* is a salute to the people of Kozhikode, health workers, and the administration who fought Nipah."⁶



C U Soon (2020)

After the initial wave of COVID-19 pandemic-themed films in Malayalam cinema, many productions shifted their focus towards exploring lockdowns' social and psychological ramifications rather than directly addressing the pandemic's prevention. Consequently, films such as Ranjith Sankar's *Sunny* (2021), Mahesh Narayanan's *C U Soon* (2020), Priyadarshan's *Corona Papers* (2023), and Shaji Kailas's *Alone* (2023) cannot be classified as survival thrillers. Instead, these films align more closely with the road movie genre.

The Kerala Fire & Rescue Service, a crucial uniformed force in disaster response, has recently been featured in Malayalam survival/ rescue films. This force was often the first to arrive at disaster sites, leading rescue operations and providing selfless service. However, Malayalam cinema has

relatively few works depicting firefighters' lives. One notable exception is Deepu Karunakaran's *Fireman* (2015), starring Mammooty. Although *Fireman* embodies the traits of a mission film, it leans more towards the rescue genre. Inspired by real-life incidents involving oil tanker accidents and LPG leaks in Kerala, the film employs graphics and VFX to recreate the tanker accident. Sunoj Velayudhan is the cinematographer, and the cast includes Unni Mukundan, Siddique and Nyla Usha.



Fireman (2015)

The plot centres on a gas tanker accident in a residential area, with the narrative closely following the rescue efforts led by the protagonist, Vijay (Mammooty). A gas tanker carrying cooking gas crashes into a national highway in a residential area. Within minutes, the fire spread to 20 metres, killing all the firefighters. The film is a close presentation of the rescue efforts led by leading fireman Vijay (Mammooty). As usual, the first half focuses on the personal and professional life of the firefighters, but the rescue mission changes it into a rescue movie. The film depicts the sacrificial and daring rescue operations carried out by selfless firefighters at the risk of their own lives, overcoming the concerns of the police,

locals, politicians and others. This film teaches people how to react in a big disaster.

Manu Ashokan's *Uyare* (2019), depicting a woman pilot's rescue of an ill-fated plane, and Mahesh Narayanan's *Takeoff* (2017), which recounts an international rescue mission during the Iraq war, also address themes of human survival. Among these, *Takeoff* aligns more closely with the characteristics of survival cinema, illustrating how individuals from diverse backgrounds unite to overcome crises.

Conclusion

Though few, survival films in Malayalam cinema resonate deeply with audiences by glorifying the struggle for survival and acknowledging the human spirit's resilience. Often inspired by actual events, these films serve as compelling narratives and historical records. Initially constrained by budget limitations, early survival films focused on individual experiences. However, there has been a significant shift towards more socially relevant storytelling, as evidenced by films like *Virus*, 2018, and *Manjummal Boys*. These works highlight the collective patience, valour, and leadership demonstrated by various community members during crises.

This transition from individual-centric to community-centric narratives underscores Malayalam cinema's social commitment. The contributions of young stars like Fahadh Faasil, Tovino Thomas, and Asif Ali have invigorated the genre, attracting producers to explore these new thematic avenues. This evolution reflects the filmmakers' ability to surmount limitations with creativity and narrative innovation.

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