

Article

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Kitchen in Malayalam Cinema: Tracing the Evolving Sensibility Through Culinary Space and Screen Representation



The Great Indian Kitchen (2021)

Introduction

Cinema has always been more than a visual spectacle; it is a cultural text that absorbs, refracts, and re-imagines the social worlds from which it emerges. In Keralam, where food is inseparable from memory, identity, caste, labour, and domestic politics, the kitchen becomes a particularly charged site of meaning. Malayalam cinema, across its century-long trajectory, has repeatedly returned to this intimate space — sometimes as a backdrop, sometimes as a metaphor, and at times as a battleground of gender, class, and power. Yet, despite its ubiquity, the kitchen has rarely been studied as a cinematic space with its own evolving grammar, politics, and aesthetic history.

This study attempts to trace the shifting representation of the kitchen, its labour, its rituals, and its inhabitants in Malayalam cinema from its early decades to the new-generation wave. It reads the kitchen not merely as a physical location but as a cultural construct — a space where caste hierarchies are enacted, where gender roles are naturalized, where humour is manufactured, where domestic conflicts erupt, and where the politics of taste, modernity, and aspiration unfold. The kitchen becomes a lens through which the changing social fabric of Keralam can be understood.

The evolution of kitchen imagery in Malayalam cinema mirrors the evolution of Keralam itself. From the smoky, dimly lit

backyards of feudal *tharavaads* (banglows) to the modular kitchens of urban apartments; from the stone grinders and clay stoves of the past to the gleaming steel and melamine of the present; from the silent, invisible labour of maids to the performative cooking of new-generation protagonists — each shift in cinematic representation corresponds to a shift in social reality. The kitchen, in this sense, becomes a cultural archive.

Malayalam cinema has historically used the kitchen as a site of humour, often relegating it to the margins of the narrative. The “kitchen comedy” tracks of the 1960s and 70s — dominated by actors like Adoor Bhasi, Bahadur, KPAC Lalitha, and Adoor Pankajam — created a parallel universe of slapstick, exaggeration, and caricature. These sequences, though beloved by audiences, also reinforced caste and class stereotypes, reducing kitchen labour to a comic spectacle. This study interrogates those patterns and the myths surrounding them, including the long-held belief that comedians improvised their scenes without written scripts.

Across the decades, filmmakers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Bharathan, KG George, and later Ashique Abu, Dileesh Pothan, Lijo Jose Pellissery, Madhupal and Geo Baby reimaged the kitchen as a site of realism, intimacy, conflict, and sensory detail. Adoor’s meticulous soundscapes — the crackle of mustard seeds, the scrape of coconut graters, the slurp of payasam — elevated the kitchen to a cinematic character. New-generation films, influenced by global food cultures and digital aesthetics, brought cooking, dining, and taste into the narrative foreground, reflecting Keralam’s shifting relationship with food, labour, and modernity.

While recording the cultural politics embedded within then kitchens in films, this study examines how caste hierarchies shaped the portrayal of maids and cooks; how patriarchy confined women to the kitchen while denying men entry; how humour was manufactured through contradictions and stereotypes; how dining scenes revealed emotional and social hierarchies; how sound, set design, and cinematography transformed the kitchen into a sensory landscape; and how new-generation cinema reclaimed the kitchen as a space of agency, conflict, and identity. It also maps the ‘kitchen’ as a dynamic cinematic space that reflects Keralam’s evolving social consciousness, where kitchen, far from being a peripheral location, is a cultural core: a site where the politics of gender, caste, labour, modernity, and desire converge.

The Evolution of Kitchen Space in Keralam: From Tharavaad to Apartment

To understand how Malayalam cinema frames the kitchen, one must first understand how Keralam itself has imagined, inhabited, and transformed this space across centuries. The kitchen in Keralam is not merely a functional room; it is a cultural institution shaped by caste, climate, architecture, gender, and ritual. Its cinematic representation is inseparable from this lived history.

In the traditional *tharavaad* — the sprawling matrilineal household of Nair and Namboothiri communities — the kitchen was both the heart of the home and the boundary of caste. It was a smoky, dimly lit space where stone grinders (*attukallu*, *ammi kallu*), clay stoves (*kari aduppu*), brass vessels, and coconut graters (*chirava*) defined the rhythm

of daily life. Food was cooked on firewood, water was drawn from the well, and meals were served on plantain leaves. The kitchen was always located in the *vadakkepuram*, the north-eastern quadrant of the house, in accordance with *Vastu Shastra* and Keralam's humid climate. Smoke escaped through tiled roofs; the scent of roasting coconut and spluttering mustard seeds permeated the air.

But this space was also deeply hierarchical. The kitchen was the domain of women — and more specifically, women of particular castes. Temple kitchens (*madapalli*), palace kitchens (*kushini*), festival kitchens (*dehanna pura*), and mass dining halls (*oottupura*) each had their own caste-coded labour systems. The people who cooked were rarely accorded dignity; the people who ate were. As producer-director and lyricist P. Sreekumaran Thampi observed, “even mothers were considered maids,” a reminder that domestic labour, however essential, was socially invisible.

Kitchen as Gendered Training Ground

For generations, Keralam's girl children were trained in cooking as if preparing for a lifelong deployment. As writer Dr. Muse Mary Joseph noted, this training resembled “mandatory military service,” where girls learned to chop, grind, wash, and serve long before they learned to read. Boys, by contrast, were kept out of the kitchen entirely — a cultural prohibition that would later become a recurring trope in Malayalam cinema, especially in comedic sequences where men enter the kitchen only to fail spectacularly.

Even in matrilineal households where women held property and lineage rights, the kitchen remained a paradoxical space: a site

of female authority and confinement at once. The *karanavar* — the male head of the *tharavaad* — wielded social power, but the kitchen was ruled by the matriarch, whose culinary labour sustained the entire household. Cinema would later draw heavily from this duality.

The Colonial and Post-Colonial Kitchen: Modernity Creeps In

With colonial influence came new materials and new aspirations. Enamel plates, ceramic bowls, and steel tumblers entered the Malayali kitchen. Kerosene stoves replaced firewood in urban homes. Dining tables appeared in elite households, though most families continued to eat seated on mats. The kitchen slowly shifted from a smoky, open-air workspace to a semi-enclosed room with shelves, chimneys, and tiled floors.

Cinema of the 1950s–70s, however, rarely captured this transition. Most Malayalam films were shot in Madras studios, where “Keralam kitchens” were improvised on Tamil sets. As production executive R.S. Prabhu recalled, Malayalam films often borrowed sets from big-budget Tamil productions, modifying them with minimal props. The result was a stylized, generic kitchen — neither fully Keralam nor fully cinematic — that became the default visual template for decades.

Kitchen Comedy and the Parallel Track: A Cultural and Cinematic History

Because early Malayalam cinema relied heavily on theatrical conventions, the kitchen became a convenient site for slapstick humour. It was a space where supporting actors — often from marginalized castes —

enacted exaggerated gestures, wore stereotypical costumes, and delivered comic relief. The kitchen was not yet a site of realism; it was a stage for spectacle.

This was partly economic. Shooting in real kitchens was difficult: smoke clogged lenses, firewood created hazards, and cramped spaces limited camera movement. Artificial sets offered more control, even if they sacrificed authenticity. Directors like K.S. Sethumadhavan and M. Krishnan Nair navigated these constraints with ingenuity, but the kitchen remained visually formulaic.

For nearly four decades, the kitchen was one of the most reliable sites of slapstick comedy, eccentric characters, and parallel narrative tracks that ran alongside the main plot. These sequences — often unrelated to the central story — became a defining feature of early Malayalam cinema, shaping audience expectations and cementing the reputations of some of its most beloved actors.

The origins of kitchen humour lie in the theatrical traditions that Malayalam cinema inherited from Tamil and Malayalam stage plays. Early films were, as Theodore Bhaskaran observed, “filmed stage dramas,” complete with exaggerated gestures, stock characters, and comic interludes inserted to entertain the “C-class” gallery audience. Producers believed — not without reason — those viewers from working-class backgrounds sought laughter after a day of labour. The kitchen, with its props, chaos, and class-coded characters, offered the perfect setting.

Directors like A.B. Raj, Sasikumar, and M. Krishnan Nair routinely inserted these tracks to ensure box-office success. Even when the main plot was tragic or socially

serious, the kitchen comedy track offered relief.

But this structure also created a hierarchy within the film itself:

- Heroes occupied the emotional and narrative centre.
- Character actors supported the plot.
- Comedians — often relegated to the kitchen — existed in a separate universe.

Films like *Veluthampi Dalawa* (1962) established the template. Bahadur’s Butler Peter — swinging from the rafters alongside a roasted chicken, dressed in a mismatched “Western” costume — embodied the contradictions that generated humour. His partner Rebecca, in a party gown, added to the absurdity. The kitchen became a circus ring, and the actors its acrobats.

The logic was simple: humour arises from incongruity. A butler who behaves like a clown, a kitchen that resembles a trapeze, a roast chicken hanging from the ceiling — these contradictions delighted audiences and became part of Malayalam cinema’s comic DNA.

Bhasi - Bahadur: Myth and Reality

No discussion of kitchen comedy is complete without the legendary duo *Adoor Bhasi and Bahadur*, whose partnership defined an era in Malayalam Cinema. A persistent myth in the industry claimed that screenwriters would leave the comedy track blank, writing “Bhasi–Bahadur” in the script, trusting the actors to improvise.

However, legendary directors like K.S. Sethumadhavan, Sreekumaran Thampi, and Adoor Gopalakrishnan reveal a more nuanced truth. Scripts were written in detail;

improvisation happened, but within the boundaries of the frame. As Sethumadhavan clarified, “They discussed the scene and acted accordingly. Improvisation was allowed — not anarchy.”

This realization reframes kitchen comedy not as frivolous improvisation but as a collaborative art form, shaped by writers, directors, and actors working in tandem.

While these sequences were beloved, they also reinforced troubling stereotypes. Maids were sexualized through tight blouses and short dhotis; male servants were portrayed as bumbling, pot-bellied caricatures; dialects were exaggerated to signal caste and class. The kitchen became a stage where social hierarchies were reproduced for laughter.

Films like *Vivahitha* (1970), *Moodal Manju* (1970), *Marunattil Oru Malayali* (1971), and *Jalatharangam* (1978) repeated the same patterns: the vegetarian Brahmin cook versus the non-vegetarian Christian maid; the flirtatious servant; the gossiping kitchen helper; the incompetent male cook who boasts of his skills. These characters were rarely allowed depth; their purpose was to amuse.

Yet, decades later, these performances remain iconic — a testament to the talent of actors like Adoor Bhasi, Bahadur, KPAC Lalitha, Adoor Pankajam, Sukumari, and Sreelatha, who elevated even the most stereotypical roles with impeccable timing and emotional intelligence.

By the late 1980s, Malayalam cinema began to shift. Filmmakers like Sathyan Anthikad, Padmarajan, Bharathan, and Adoor Gopalakrishnan integrated humour into the main narrative rather than isolating it in the

kitchen. The parallel track began to fade. Audiences, exposed to global cinema through film societies and film festivals, demanded more cohesive storytelling.

Yet the legacy of kitchen comedy endures. The rhythms of Bhasi–Bahadur, the eccentricities of Jagathy Sreekumar, the improvisational brilliance of Nedumudi Venu — these performances continue to shape Malayalam humour. Even new-generation films occasionally echo these patterns, though with greater self-awareness.

The Kitchen as Women’s Cultural Domain

For generations, the kitchen in Keralam has been coded as a women’s space — a domain where femininity is both constructed and policed. Malayalam cinema, especially in its early decades, absorbed this cultural logic without question. Women were shown chopping vegetables, grinding coconut, stirring curries, and serving food with a quiet efficiency that mirrored the expectations of domestic life. Their identities were often tethered to their culinary competence; a woman who could not cook was branded “spoilt,” while a man who entered the kitchen was mocked as effeminate or incompetent.

This gendered coding appears repeatedly in films across eras. In *Vivahitha* (1970), *Aaravam* (1978), *Ilakkangal* (1982), and *Adaminte Variyellu* (1984), the kitchen becomes the stage on which women’s subservience, resilience, and emotional burdens are enacted. Even in matrilineal households — where women historically held property and lineage rights — cinema often depicted them confined to the kitchen, their power circumscribed by patriarchal norms.



The kitchen thus becomes a paradox: a space of female authority in practice, but of female subordination in representation. But when it comes to *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), taking a cue from *Adaminte Variyellu*, tries to criticize and question this male domination and gender discrimination to a great extent, which reflects the sociological change in the society.

Kitchen as Emotional Geography

Beyond gender, the kitchen in Malayalam cinema functions as an emotional landscape. It is where tensions simmer, where affection is expressed through food, where conflicts erupt over taste, labour, or hierarchy. The kitchen is where mothers feed sons with indulgent care, where sisters serve brothers with affection, where daughters-in-law negotiate their place in the family, and where maids navigate the precarious boundaries of servitude.

In films like *Kudumbapuram* (1988), the kitchen becomes the site of whispered grievances, alliances, and emotional negotiations between women who otherwise have little agency in the patriarchal household. The backdoor of the kitchen becomes a confessional space where mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law share their frustrations, even as they remain powerless before the egos of men.

Similarly, in *Varavelpu* (1989), the kitchen reveals the hypocrisy of familial affection. When Murali returns from the Gulf, his sisters-in-law compete to serve him delicacies; when he announces he is not returning abroad, the warmth evaporates. The kitchen exposes the transactional nature of relationships, revealing the family's dependence on his earnings.

Kitchen in Malayalam cinema functions as a mnemonic device — a way of remembering Keralam's past. The smoky hearths, the stone grinders, the coconut-oil lamps, the plantain leaves, the sound of grinding and frying — these sensory details evoke a collective nostalgia for a world that is rapidly disappearing. Films like *Elipathayam*, *Nizhal Kuthu*, *Manjadikkuru*, and *Kuttan Pillayude Shivarathri* use the kitchen to summon memories of childhood, festivals, joint families, and the rhythms of rural life. In this sense, the kitchen becomes a cultural archive — a space where Keralam remembers itself.

The joint family, once the dominant social unit in Keralam, created a kitchen culture that was communal, hierarchical, and ritualistic. Malayalam cinema has repeatedly returned to this world, often with nostalgia, sometimes with critique.

In films like *Ennenum Kannettante* (1986) and *Manichitrathazhu* (1993), the tharavaad kitchen is a bustling ecosystem:

- the matriarch presides over the cooking,
- daughters and daughters-in-law assist,
- maids grate coconut or wash vessels,
- children run in and out,
- and the patriarch appears only to eat.

The kitchen becomes a social theatre, where relationships are revealed through gestures of labour and service. The hierarchy is unmistakable: the elder woman commands, the younger women obey, and the men remain peripheral until the moment of dining.

These scenes are not merely decorative; they preserve a cultural memory of a Keralam that is rapidly fading. The smell of firewood, the sound of grinding stones, the sight of brass vessels — these sensory details evoke a world where food was communal labour and the kitchen was the centre of domestic life.

Kitchen as Caste-Marked Space

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the kitchen in Malayalam cinema is its caste coding. Historically, the kitchen was a site of purity and pollution, governed by strict caste rules. Cinema inherited these hierarchies. Maids and cooks — often from marginalized castes — were depicted with stereotypical costumes, dialects, and demeanours. Their names (*Janu*, *Ponnamma*, *Kamala*, *Ammini*) signalled their social position; their costumes (tight choli blouses, short dhotis) sexualized their labour; their roles were confined to the margins of the narrative. Her dialect was rustic, her mannerisms exaggerated, her emotional range limited to loyalty, fear, or flirtation.

This was not accidental. As costume designers like R.K. and Costumer turned actor Indrans acknowledged, early Malayalam cinema inherited Tamil prejudices about Malayali domestic workers. The result was a visual stereotype that persisted for decades, even as Keralam's social fabric transformed.

Films like *Adimakal* (1969), *Neelathamara* (1979 and 2009), *Ilakkangal*

(1982), *Nakhakshatungal* (1986), *Sallapam* (1996), and *Nandanam* (2002) repeat the same narrative:

- a young maid enters a wealthy household,
- is exploited by an upper-caste man,
- becomes pregnant,
- and is abandoned without consequence.

The kitchen becomes the site of her vulnerability — a space where she is visible enough to be desired, but invisible enough to be discarded.

Even male servants are caricatured: pot-bellied Namboothiri cooks with *kuduma*, towel-clad helpers, and bumbling assistants whose bodies and dialects are played for humour. The kitchen becomes a caste theatre, where hierarchies are reinforced through costume, gesture, and narrative function. Their dialects are exaggerated, their intelligence mocked, their loyalty unquestioned. Actors like Adoor Bhasi, Bahadur, Poojapura Ravi, and Kuthiravattam Pappu elevated these roles with brilliance, but the roles themselves were structurally limited. The kitchen, in these films, is not a workplace — it is a caste theatre.

Kitchen as Space of Desire

Malayalam cinema has long associated the kitchen with forbidden intimacy. Because the kitchen is a semi-private space — neither fully public nor fully secluded — it becomes the setting for clandestine glances, whispered conversations, and illicit encounters. In older films, this was often played for humour or titillation; in new-generation films, it becomes a site of emotional complexity.

In *Mayanadi* (2017), the kitchen becomes the threshold between casual

conversation and sexual intimacy. In *Salt and Pepper* (2011), it becomes the space where affection is kneaded into dough and desire is layered like pastry. In *Ustad Hotel* (2012), it becomes a site of intergenerational bonding and philosophical reflection. The kitchen, in these films, is no longer a place of servitude; it is a place of becoming.



Ustad Hotel (2012)

The Sensory Politics of Food on Screen

Malayalam cinema's dining scenes also preserve the cultural memory of Keralam's food practices:

- Eating on plantain leaves
- The etiquette of serving elders first
- The silence maintained during meals
- The ritual of washing hands at the well
- The communal feasts of weddings and festivals
- The contrast between vegetarian and non-vegetarian households
- The shift from floor-seated meals to dining tables

These details, often taken for granted, become invaluable records of a society in transition.

If the kitchen is the site of labour and intimacy in Malayalam cinema, the dining scene is its

emotional and sensory culmination. Nowhere else does the cinema of Keralam reveal its cultural codes, hierarchies, and aesthetic sensibilities as vividly as in the act of eating. From the rustle of plantain leaves to the clink of steel tumblers, from the slurp of *pulissery* to the crackle of *pappadam*, Malayalam cinema has long understood that food is not merely a prop — it is a language.

No filmmaker in India has explored the sensory and symbolic possibilities of dining with the precision of Adoor Gopalakrishnan. In his films, eating is never incidental; it is a narrative device, a psychological indicator, and a cultural marker. His attention to detail — the way rice is mixed, the sound of chewing, the rhythm of serving — transforms the dining table into a site of revelation.

In *Kodiyettam* (1977), the lunch scene between Sankarankutty (Bharat Gopi) and his sister Sarojini is a masterclass in observational cinema. The camera lingers on the textures of food, the movements of hands, the subtle shifts in expression. Sankarankutty's gluttony, innocence, and emotional dependence are conveyed not through dialogue but through the way he eats — with abandon, with pleasure, with childlike absorption.

In *Elipathayam* (1981), the act of serving food becomes a metaphor for entrapment. Rajamma's repetitive labour — cooking, serving, cleaning — mirrors her psychological confinement. The dining scenes are choreographed with ritualistic precision, revealing the oppressive rhythms of a decaying feudal household.

In *Nalu Pennungal* (2007), the eating scenes in the episode *Kanyaka* are among the longest and most detailed in Malayalam

cinema. Narayanan's voracious appetite, captured in extreme close-ups lasting nearly three minutes, becomes a commentary on desire, masculinity, and marital dysfunction. The slurping, chewing, and swallowing — recorded with painstaking care — create an almost tactile experience for the viewer. Adoor's philosophy is simple yet profound: "Food reveals character." How a person eats — hurriedly, greedily, delicately, silently — exposes their social background, emotional state, and inner conflicts.

Adoor's films also revolutionized the use of sound in Malayalam cinema. Long before "sound design" became a recognized craft, he and sound engineers like Devadas and N. Harikumar were capturing the tonal subtleties of cooking and eating with scientific precision.

The sound of mustard seeds spluttering, the scrape of a ladle against a clay pot, the creak of a pulley drawing water from a well — these were not background noises but narrative textures. They conveyed mood, place, and authenticity. They made the audience *taste* the scene.

Sound Engineer Harikumar recalls how they recorded the sound of hot tea being poured into a steel tumbler — reheating the tea repeatedly to maintain the correct viscosity. They recreated the sound of a rope sliding over a well's pulley by counting the exact number of pulls the actor made during shooting. These were acts of devotion to realism.

Ironically, during digital restoration, many of these subtle sounds were lost — erased as "noise" by automated filters. What was once a landmark in Indian sound design

became a cautionary tale about the fragility of cinematic heritage.

Dining as Emotional Theatre

Dining scenes in Malayalam cinema often serve as emotional turning points. The dining table becomes a stage where relationships are tested, secrets revealed, and hierarchies asserted.

In *Ozhimuri* (2012), the dining scenes are ethnographic documents of South Travancore's fastidious food culture. The rituals of serving, the etiquette of accepting food, the commentary on *sambhar* and *rasam* — all reveal the pride, rigidity, and emotional undercurrents of a community negotiating modernity.

In *Njandukalude Naattil Oridavela* (2017), the dining table becomes the site where Sheela Chacko reveals her cancer diagnosis to her family. The scene captures the awkwardness, fear, and tenderness of a family confronting vulnerability — all while food sits untouched on their plates.

In *Kuttan Pillayude Shivarathri* (2018), the 4.5-minute dinner sequence is a tour de force of realism. Shot in a cramped kitchen with minimal lighting, it captures the tensions between Kuttan Pillai, his son-in-law, and the extended family. The jackfruit dishes, the porcelain plates, the ambient sounds — all contribute to a scene that feels lived-in, familiar, and deeply Malayali.

The eating scenes in *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) are deliberately claustrophobic, using the repetitive sounds and motions of cooking and serving to expose how women's labour is invisibilized and how patriarchy turns the act of eating into a quiet assertion of male entitlement.

New-generation films reflect Kerala's changing relationship with food. Junk food, takeaways, café culture, and global cuisines enter the cinematic frame. In *Mayanadi*, Aparna and Sameera order pizza, shawarma, and sandwiches — symbols of urban convenience and cosmopolitan identity. In *Salt and Pepper*, food becomes a metaphor for desire, nostalgia, and connection.

Kerala's dining table has expanded — and cinema has expanded with it.

Stereotypical Maids: The Rise of *Kudumbashree* and the Changing Kitchen

One of the most troubling patterns in Malayalam cinema is the sexualization of maids. Because the kitchen is a semi-private space, it becomes a site for voyeurism, innuendo, and illicit desire. Films from the 1970s to the early 2000s repeatedly depict maids as sexually available, morally ambiguous, or temptresses by default.

Even in new-generation films, this trope persists. In *Beautiful* (2011), the maid Kanyaka is introduced through a “fashion parade” of maids, where the hero selects her based on her visible bra strap. In *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012), she becomes a sex worker, her poverty and vulnerability exploited for narrative titillation. These portrayals reveal a disturbing continuity: the maid's body remains a site of cinematic consumption. Yet, Malayalam cinema also contains counter currents — films that expose the exploitation of domestic workers and critique the prejudices embedded in middle-class households.

In *Varsham* (2014), the Tamil labourer Kashi is humiliated, underpaid, and treated with suspicion — a reflection of Kerala's

entrenched caste and regional biases. In *Uncle* (2018), the maid is insulted by an elderly woman who warns the family to “keep an eye on her,” echoing the widespread belief that maids are inherently untrustworthy.

The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a quiet revolution in Kerala's domestic labour landscape: the rise of *Kudumbashree*, a women's empowerment mission that professionalized household work, offered financial security, and created new social identities for women who had long been invisible.

Cinema responded. Films like *Udahanam Sujatha* (2017) and *Minnaminungu* (2017) depict housemaids as central characters — resilient, ambitious, and dignified. *Sujatha*, a single mother, works multiple jobs, studies at night, and refuses to let her daughter inherit her struggles. The unnamed heroine of *Minnaminungu* navigates poverty with determination, refusing to be reduced to stereotype.

Yet, even as cinema evolves, prejudices linger. The maid is still often the first suspect in a theft, the first target of gossip, the first body to be sexualized. Films that attempt progressive portrayals sometimes slip into old patterns, revealing how deeply caste and class hierarchies are embedded in Kerala's cultural psyche.

As critic K. Gopinathan observes, modern cinema has not liberated women from the kitchen; it has merely redesigned the kitchen to make confinement appear attractive. The sleek modular kitchen of the new generation is, in his words, “a luxurious prison.”

The Modern Kitchen: Modular, Urban, and Cinematic

By the 1990s and 2000s, Keralam's kitchens underwent a dramatic transformation. Gulf migration brought new appliances — mixers, grinders, refrigerators, non-stick cookware, gas stoves, and later, microwaves. Modular kitchens with cabinets, chimneys, and granite counters replaced the smoky hearths of the past. Backyards shrank; apartment living compressed domestic space into compact units where the kitchen, dining area, and living room merged.

Cinema responded accordingly. The kitchen became brighter, cleaner, more colourful — a space of aspiration rather than drudgery. Directors like Fazil, Priyadarshan, and Shaji Kailas embraced this aesthetic shift, using over-lighting and objective photography to highlight utensils, textures, and surfaces. The kitchen was no longer a backstage; it was part of the *mise-en-scène*.

The arrival of the new-generation wave in Malayalam cinema marked a profound shift in how kitchens, food, and domestic labour were imagined on screen. If earlier decades treated the kitchen as a site of servitude, slapstick, or silent endurance, the new wave reframed it as a space of intimacy, aspiration, sensory pleasure, and narrative depth. This transformation was not merely aesthetic; it reflected Keralam's changing relationship with food, technology, gender, and global culture.

With the advent of digital cinematography, the kitchen became a site of unprecedented visual intimacy. Cameras could now capture the glisten of oil, the steam rising from rice, the crackle of mustard seeds, the sheen of a steel plate. Films like *Salt and*

Pepper, *Ustad Hotel*, *Maheshinte Prathikaram*, *Angamaly Diaries*, *Sudani from Nigeria*, *Kuttanpillayude Sivarathri* and *The Great Indian Kitchen* foregrounded food and cooking as narrative engines. The kitchen was no longer a comic interlude; it was a space of emotion, identity, conflict, and desire.

This shift reflects a broader cultural change: Keralam's growing fascination with food as lifestyle, nostalgia, and social media currency. The kitchen, once hidden, is now performative — a space to be displayed, photographed, and aestheticized.

Keralam's food culture underwent a dramatic evolution in the early 21st century. Eating out became a lifestyle, not a luxury. Social media platforms — especially Facebook and Instagram — turned food into a visual commodity. Food photography, recipe videos, café culture, and “food vlogging” became part of everyday life. The Malayali palate expanded to include shawarma, pizza, sushi, burgers, and fusion cuisine, even as nostalgia for *puttu*, *kappa*, and *meen curry* intensified. Food was no longer a background detail; it became a protagonist.

Digital cinematography, which allowed unprecedented intimacy in small spaces. High-resolution cameras, LED lighting, and handheld rigs made it possible to shoot inside cramped kitchens without losing detail or atmosphere.

Films like *Udaharanam Sujatha* (2017), *C/o Saira Banu* (2017), *Adukkalayil Paniyundu* (2018), and *Kuttanadan Marpappa* (2018) used digital tools to capture the textures of everyday cooking — steam rising from rice, oil shimmering in pans, the glow of refrigerator light, the hum of

mixer-grinders. These films democratized the kitchen, showing it not as a stylized set but as a lived-in space.

In *Udaharanam Sujatha*, the cramped one-room apartment becomes a canvas for emotional and visual innovation. The kitchen is where Sujatha studies, cooks, dreams, and strategizes. The cinematography turns her modest space into a site of resilience and aspiration.

In *Ozhimuri* (2012), food becomes a marker of caste, community, and patriarchal control. In *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016), food reflects the rustic charm of Idukki's landscape. In *Angamaly Diaries* (2017), Lijo Jose Pellissery uses pork dishes, beef fry, and toddy shop cuisine to evoke the raw, visceral energy of Angamaly's street culture.

New-generation cinema also reimagines the kitchen as a space of empowerment. In *Minnaminungu* (2017), the unnamed heroine navigates poverty with dignity, using her kitchen as a base for survival. In *Udaharanam Sujatha*, the kitchen becomes a classroom where Sujatha teaches herself mathematics to inspire her daughter.

These films reject the old trope of the maid as victim or temptress. Instead, they portray women as strategists, caregivers, and dreamers — negotiating the pressures of modern life with resilience.

Salt and Pepper: The Politics of Taste

Ashique Abu's *Salt and Pepper* (2011), written by Shyam Pushkaran and Dileesh Nair, was the watershed moment. It was the first Malayalam film to treat food not as a prop but as a narrative engine — a medium through which characters meet, quarrel, reconcile, and fall in love.

The film's close-ups of jalebi being fried, *thattukada* delicacies sizzling, and *thattikootu dosa* being prepared were unprecedented in Malayalam cinema. Shyju Khalid's cinematography transformed cooking into sensual spectacle. Food became a metaphor for desire, loneliness, nostalgia, and companionship.

Kalidasan (Lal), a middle-aged archaeologist, and Maya (Swetha Menon), a dubbing artist, bond over food long before they meet. Their romance unfolds through recipes, phone calls, and shared cravings. The kitchen becomes a site of emotional vulnerability — a place where they reveal their insecurities, preferences, and histories.

The film's iconic "Joan's Rainbow Cake" sequence — a four-layered montage intercutting myth, memory, and present — is one of the most inventive uses of food in Indian cinema. It collapses time and space, linking a wartime love story with the contemporary lives of two lonely Malayalis. Food becomes a bridge across eras, cultures, and emotional landscapes.

The Darker Undercurrents: Anti-Woman Tropes Persist

Yet, the new wave is not free from contradictions. Films like *Beautiful* (2011) and *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012) reveal how easily modern cinema slips into old prejudices. The maid Kanyaka is sexualized, commodified, and humiliated — a reminder that even progressive filmmakers can reproduce patriarchal fantasies under the guise of boldness.

Similarly, in *Munroe Thuruthu* (2016), the maid Kathu becomes the object of voyeurism across three generations of men —

a disturbing continuity of caste and gendered exploitation.

These films expose a deeper truth: *modernity does not automatically dismantle prejudice; it often repackages it.*

Kitchen as Space of Surveillance and Vulnerability

The kitchen in Malayalam cinema is also a space where women — especially maids — are watched, judged, and controlled. It is the room where suspicion is directed first, where theft is assumed, where moral policing is enacted.

In *Uncle* (2018), the maid is warned to be “kept under watch,” revealing the deep-seated mistrust that middle-class households harbour toward domestic workers. In *Varsham* (2014), the Tamil labourer Kashi is exploited and humiliated, exposing Kerala’s caste and regional prejudices.

The kitchen becomes a panopticon, where the gaze of the household — and the gaze of the camera — disciplines the bodies that labour within it.

Conclusion

Cinema, like food, is an art of time. It absorbs the rhythms of everyday life, preserves what is fading, and anticipates what is emerging. The kitchen — that intimate, smoky, fragrant, contested space — has travelled with Malayalam cinema across its entire history, shifting shape as Kerala itself transformed. What began as a peripheral backdrop in studio-built sets has become a site of cultural memory, sensory richness, political tension, and narrative depth.

This study reveals that the kitchen in Malayalam cinema is not merely a room; it is a cultural text. It encodes Kerala’s anxieties about caste, gender, labour, modernity, and identity. It reflects the evolution of family structures, from matrilineal tharavaads to nuclear apartments. It exposes the contradictions of a society that reveres food but undervalues those who cook it. It documents the sensory heritage of a land where the crackle of mustard seeds and the aroma of coconut oil are as evocative as poetry.

Across decades, the kitchen in Malayalam cinema has served three intertwined functions:

- As archive, preserving the sensory and architectural memory of Kerala’s food culture.
- As mirror, reflecting the social hierarchies, prejudices, and emotional dynamics of Malayali life.
- As metaphor, representing desire, conflict, nostalgia, aspiration, and identity.

The kitchen is where Kerala remembers itself — through taste, sound, labour, and ritual.

As Kerala continues to globalize, digitize, and urbanize, the kitchen will remain a vital cinematic space. It will evolve, but it will not disappear. Whether in the cramped apartment of a single mother, the bustling tharavaad of a family reunion, the *thattukada* of a small town, or the modular kitchen of a cosmopolitan couple, the kitchen will continue to reveal who we are, what we value, and how we live.

In the end, the kitchen in Malayalam cinema is not just a room.

It is a cultural biography — of a land, a people, and a changing world.

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