



**Reimagining the *Mana*: Uncanny Aesthetics, Caste Histories,  
and Folkloric Counter-Narratives in *Bramayugam***

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**Abstract**

This paper elucidates on the depiction of an aristocratic *mana*, the abode of a traditional Brahmin household, as portrayed in the 2024, Malayalam film *Bramayugam*. The *mana*'s fixed structure follows a strict pure-impure axis demarcating specific areas for people from different genders, castes, and statuses. Using symbolic architecture, monochromatic visuals, and an unsettling soundscape, the film challenges canonical depictions of the *mana*, dismantling the romanticised upper-caste imaginary in the Malayalam-speaking region. By casting a folkloric deity, Chathan, at the forefront, and two subaltern characters as other leads, a power struggle emerges that undoes the widely advertised 'authentic' image of Kerala associated with the *mana*. The film has detached features such as hospitality and frivolity tied to a *mana*. The place is reconstructed as a space that unravels caste and feudal hierarchies through the aesthetics of uncanniness. The textual ingredients used for the restructuring comprise the literary archetypes familiar to the Malayalam mythscape and counter-narratives from folklore, making the film a crucial part of contemporary caste-critical cinema and regional history.

**Keywords:** Caste, Chathan, Folklore, Malayalam, *Mana*, Cinema, Uncanny.

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## Introduction

The image of an aristocratic *mana* has solidified as an irrevocable part of the tradition of Kerala served on a golden plate to its tourists. Through carefully constructing myths, appropriated folklore, and dedicated cultural production, selected age-old mansions in Kerala have derived revenue from this canon. *Mana*, the Malayalam word for a mansion, is usually associated with Brahminical households. *Illam*, is yet another word used to refer to the *mana*, but the casteist exclusivity that is porous for *mana* is entirely sealed for *Illam*. Both these terms have a canonical stance in the Malayalam literary scene and architecture. Hence, with the representation of a *mana* in an unconventional manner in the popular culture with contrasting lore contesting the narratives of the powerful, *Bramayugam*, a 2024 Malayalam-language film, written and directed by Rahul Sadasivan, is a crucial deviation that needs to be examined. It created an uproar amongst the film fanatics of the Malayalam film industry with its first look poster as it cast Mammooty, the superstar of the Malayalam industry, in its lead role, in a horror genre, and promised a black-and-white experience to cinephiles. The folk horror genre began gaining critical traction in Indian cinema post-2018 and is now establishing a distinct presence in Malayalam films through works like *Nine* (2019) and *Kumari* (2022).

*Bramayugam* opened up to positive reviews and became a critically and commercially successful film; the first black and white film from the industry to collect more than 50 crores at the box office. The film has been reviewed as a complex horror film rather than an 'easier' one built on thrills and jump scares. Set in the seventeenth century, *Bramayugam* follows Thevan, a *paanan* (singer), who unwittingly enters a *mana* ruled by Kodumon Potti and a mysterious cook. At first, he is happy to have escaped the dangers of the forest and to have a place to lay his head down. But later, he understands the *mana* is a magical space controlled by a vengeful Chathan who disguises himself as Potti, and no one can escape it. After constant struggle and the cook's partially disclosed plan, the two rid Chathan of his extraordinary superpowers. The cook then takes over the *mana*, arguing that he is an illegitimate son of Kodumon Potti and tries to enslave Chathan. But, Thevan intervenes, resulting in a fight, which

ends with the *mana* burning down. In the tale's end, the audience sees the cook being killed by the colonising Portuguese, and Thevan with an inhuman aura moving through the forest with a wicked look. The horror mode adopted by Rahul Sadasivan evokes a feeling of the uncanny in the audience. The concept of "uncanny," initially coined by Ernst Jentsch and explored further by Sigmund Freud, denotes the feeling of being fearful of a familiar being, object, or space that behaves in an unfamiliar way. The study of this experience has led to the formation of "uncanny studies," which derives from a range of theoretical perspectives from architecture, postcolonial studies, to sociology and urban studies.

This paper seeks to critically investigate how *Bramayugam* deconstructs the canonical representation of the *mana* through visual and narrative strategies grounded in uncanniness. The initial section discusses and interrogates the contrasting narratives from Brahminical and subaltern standpoints and how the film uses them as tools, uncovering how the caste hierarchies are reimagined through folklore and subaltern historiography. By analysing the character of Chathan as a metaphor for repressed resistance, the study interrogates the cultural and cinematic tropes that uphold Brahminical dominance. The second section deeply examines the unsettling set design, eerie soundscape, and black-and-white medium. Furthermore, the paper positions *Bramayugam* within a broader trend in Malayalam cinema that foregrounds caste critique, thereby, contributing to the discourse on the role of regional films in reimagining casteist structures and history. For the purpose of this paper, all passages attributed to the film *Bramayugam* have been translated into English by the authors.

### **Chathan: From Subaltern Resistance to Canonical Appropriation**

The *mana* becomes a site of an age-old, ruthless struggle for power, shifting from the orderly category of "place" to the blurred contours of "space." This spatial transformation is governed by a *mayikavalayam*, a magical circumference regulating mobility and power. An ever-burning lamp in the granary cellar anchors the *valayam*, restraining both the inhabitants and Chathan's power within the mansion. Installed after the first Potti<sup>1</sup>, Chudalan Potti, was

blessed by the pre-Vedic goddess *Varahi*<sup>iii</sup>, the lamp's magic box (chellam) became a tool of wish-fulfilment. This containment mirrors folkloric limits placed on other beings—*Yakshis* tethered by iron nails or *genies* bound to lamps. The *valayam*, thus, constructs a spatial frame for uncanniness to erupt. Within this space resides Chathan, a shape-shifting magical figure drawn from folklore. Often rendered as a trickster or child deity with animalistic features, Chathan (or Kuttichathan) appears both in subaltern and canonised narratives. While canonical myths, like those in *Aithiyamaala*<sup>iii</sup>, depict him as a magical servant, *thottam* sung before Kuttichathan Theyyam presents him as a rebel against Brahminical hegemony (Tarabout 454). In Northern Kerala, Brahmins such as those from the Punchamon illam<sup>iv</sup> conduct Chathan Upasana<sup>v</sup> (Parpola 179), yet the deity's rebellious potential survives in ritual and oral traditions.

In the *thottam*, Chathan is born to Parameswaran and Parvati disguised as Valluvars<sup>vi</sup> in Malanga Naadu. Denied entry to Kailasam, the divine couple entrusts the child to the magical Kaalakattu Brahmin family. But Chathan resists the family's vegetarian norms, lashes out at his stepmother, and is ultimately killed by his stepfather. The priest Kaalakattu beheads him at Kanjirapuzha, but Chathan returns in terrifying multiplicity. Though priests try to destroy him in ritual fire, hundreds of Chathans rise and destroy them. Only the Malaya<sup>vii</sup> community's Perumalayan can appease him through Theyyam (Karippath 132; Namboothiri 190; Parpola 190). This legend's defiance shifts power from Brahmin to Malaya, with Theyyam as protest art resisting caste violence. Chathan, as a rebellious, undefeatable figure, enables lower castes to negotiate power. The Theyyam stage becomes carnivalesque (V. 4), temporarily reversing social order by elevating the performer's body despite caste (Mathew and Pandya 6; "Unravelling"). This performance embeds Chathan in collective memory, influencing his image in *Bramayugam*. In one scene, Thevan dreams of Chathan, an image resonant with a Theyyam-like headgear (Fig. 1). Fan-made posters similarly reimagine Mammootty's character through this aesthetic (Fig. 2), echoing the *thottam*'s mythic roots and surfacing as spectral memory within the narrative.



Fig. 1. Chathan appearing in Thevan's dream, Rahul Sadasivan (dir.), *Bramayugam*, 2024. India. © Night Shift Productions, YNOT Studios



Fig. 2. *Bramayugam* poster made by the Instagram creator, Aesthetic Kunjamma (@aesthetickunjamma), as directed by the film crew, 2024, Instagram. © Aesthetic Kunjamma

In the canonical text of *Aithiyamaala*, there are two significant references to Chathan in two tales named “Kunjamanpottiyum

Mattapalli Namboothiriyum” and “Parayipetta Panthirukulam.” In both these tales, Chathan is a faithful servant who is used to prove the points of his master through mindless labor and blind following (the film’s plot is loosely based on Puchamon illam or Kunjamon illam mentioned in the former tale). In *Parayipetta Panthirukulam*, Akavoor Chathan is a servant with magical capabilities who hints at his knowledge that is incomprehensible to the Brahmin lord. In the tale, Chathan prays to *Maadanpothu*<sup>viii</sup>, whom he considers a form of *parabrahma*<sup>ix</sup>, and shocks the Potti. The politics behind the construction of *Parayipetta Panthirukulam* and its function in the collective conscience of Keralites reveals manipulation, foreseeing a casteist dominance for centuries (Lijisha A.T.). The migrating Brahmins who came to Kerala, represented by Vararuchi in the tale, established their dominance through farming knowledge, introduced their religion, and sustained it using folklore (Jayashree et al). The plot of this folktale shows how each group of the natives who did different occupations became the children of the Brahmin. Hidden behind the often-told tales of magic and absurdity are the dirtier history of appropriating guardian deities and leaving the natives disillusioned, delegitimising their beliefs as black magic (Lijisha A.T.). There exists a duality between these depictions, as in the former, Chathan is elevated to the level of a deity after being a reckless child against the Brahminical values, and in the latter, he is seen as an obedient servant who believes in the mundane and the absurd, and is mysterious.

*Bramayugam* takes the same archetypes existing in the mythscape<sup>x</sup> of Kerala and constructs a folk narrative where the Brahminical hegemony is turned on its head. The Chathan of the film takes over the “sacred space” of *mana* and ruins its glorified face by perpetuating the struggle for power between the entrapped. Thevan’s character is a *paanan*, a court singer, who accepts that he is related to Poomani Paananar. The tenth progeny of the *Panthirukulam* is a court singer called Paananar. The cook mentions Mayyannoor Thachan, who built the Kodumon Mana, akin to Perumthachan, the eleventh progeny of the *Panthirukulam*. At Thevan’s arrival at the *mana*, he recites panegyric verses exemplifying the Brahmin overlords. The beauty of the traditional *mana* is glorified through the song “Poomani Maalika.” Thevan seems to have ignored the dilapidated state of the

*mana* by reimagining it, enabling his mental image of the *mana* referred to as “Kolloth,” where he used to be a court singer. He believes that the cook and he hold the same position in the *mana*, recognising how they are just puppets in the master’s hands. But, only in the climax will Thevan and the viewers know how the cook boasts of his lineage and asserts power over the space, exploiting it similarly to how the tale of the *panthirukulam* works in the mythscape of Kerala. But, unlike in the myth, in the film, the cook remains unrecognised by his father’s family, not given a name, and considered an “other” – enslaved by the household. The deconstruction of such myths written from the Brahmanical perspective portrays the intricate manipulation employed to include caste as a benevolent system.

Contemporary historiographies underline how deities like Chathan were appropriated, tamed, and converted into ritual tools by Brahmin families. Opposite to the rebellious strain in folklore, a domesticated, servile depiction of Chathan is furnished in upper-caste myths with accentuated magical powers, which have created sufficient circumstances to extoll the overlords’ power and show their divinity and wisdom. The film foregrounds tension between the contrasting depictions by drawing on *thottam* narratives and representing the return of Chathan as a spectral force within the *mana*, which becomes a metaphor for the return of the repressed. In *Bramayugam*, Chathan is devilish and ruthless, yet trapped within the horizons where his power allows him to control both biotic and abiotic. But, he is not able to escape the *valayam* of the *mana* as he is envisaged in the duality of being an enslaver and an enslaved person within the same space. While Potti tortures Chathan and exploits him for his whims and wants, the subaltern deity waits for the right opportunity to escape. The intentional placement of specific motifs, such as cobwebs, termites, and caged animals, symbolises entrapment. *Yakshi* acts as a guard dog for directing people into the *mana* and frightening them into not leaving the place to an extent that they consider the *mana* an abode. Chathan’s entrapment within the *mana* reflects the condition of subaltern knowledge and power. The *mana* becomes a microcosm of the caste system that traps the subaltern, leads to a power struggle, and imminent rupture.

### **Recasting the *Mana*: Space, Surveillance, and the Uncanny**

The *mana* structured by Potti and Chathan resembles the panopticon model of prison, given by Jeremy Bentham, who, with his brother, formulated the idea of a panopticon prison wherein the authorities can house criminals, lunatics, or the sick. Bentham believed that the panopticon would be an ideal place to act as “perpetual prisons in the room of death, or prisons for confinement before trial, or penitentiary-houses, or houses of correction, or work-houses, or manufactories, or mad-houses, or hospitals, or schools” (Bentham 4). The architecture of the panopticon makes the inmates believe they are under constant surveillance. Foucault uses the metaphor of the panopticon model to expound on the social control systems and the power-knowledge relations. The exertion of power in such models shows how carefully fabricated inmates are the stronghold of the powerful. The *mana*, a respectful abode of frivolity, where the knowledgeable reside, is shown in battle with the knowledge systems outside Brahmin understanding, as in the Akavoor Chathan’s legend, the conception of *Maadanpothu* as *parabrahma*. Additionally, *Bramayugam* uses the panopticon model by refashioning the composition of *mana*. The traditional courtyard, other housing, and storage areas of a *mana* are categorised extensively to curtail the free movement of women and other upper-caste members and restrict the lower-caste members from entering it (Nayar 55, 60). In *Bramayugam*, Chathan, the ostracised deity, takes the role of patriarch, allowing access despite the inmates’ caste, creed, or gender, and exerts constant surveillance on them. The *mana* becomes a failed panopticon where the inmates resist and eventually destroy the structure from within. The cook, Thevan, and Chathan become allegorical figures: the illegitimate, the artist, and the deity of resistance—all marginalised figures rewriting the narrative from within.

*Bramayugam* challenges the *mana*, by depicting it as a space disposed into a chaotic realm where the temporality and the spatiality are incomprehensible. Thevan is constantly nostalgic when he arrives in the *mana*, but eventually, he forgets his identity and cherished memories. He loses track of time as the *mana* has capricious weather, and the space is locked into the same monsoon state for months. The

rain, which acts as a symbol of isolation (Sadasivan n.p.), represents uncertainty of time and space and blurs the boundary of the space, and deprives the space of sunlight as extolled in hymn 3, *Aadithyan Illathe* ('without sun'). The weather becomes a significant factor of uncanniness as it directly affects agriculture and sustenance. The Brahminical households were the center of agriculture in the medieval age (N T 38). The rice is cultivated under their supervision through intensive labor, exploiting the lower classes. The age-old fantasies of *mana* are hinged on surplus rice and agricultural activity, which is depicted in *Bramayugam* in an uncanny light. Without any farming activity or management, the excess grain in the granary (Fig. 3) suggests a magical origin, triggering the uncanny. An infertile land where even a mango tree fails to blossom is a bad omen to Thevan. He is unable to track the time based on seasons, as the rain continues. When Thevan meets the cook, the cook asks: "Which month is this?," pointing to the lack of temporal clarity in the space, to which Thevan replies that the *kannikoythu*<sup>xi</sup> is over and monsoon has begun. The sense of unease felt in circumstances of losing continuity with the past and the natural environment directly correlates with a range of distinctively modern anxieties.



Fig. 3. Portrays the uncanny surplus in the granary, Rahul Sadasivan (dir.), *Bramayugam*, 2024. India. © Night Shift Productions, YNOT Studios.

An *illam* or a *mana* is built architecturally based on the *Vaasthu Purusha Mandala* that is "a metaphysical square divided into a grid of 81 equal parts, provided the mathematical and diagrammatic basis for the house layout" (Nayar 49). The *illam* symbolises a man's body,

and each part has a distinct function. The kitchen at the northeastern corner is considered the mouth of the symbolic man (Dili et al. 920; Nayar 50). The central courtyard is considered the navel of the man, where all the auspicious ceremonies, such as marriage and prenatal rituals, take place. The area surrounding the house, called the *parambu*, is usually an agrarian place, “neatly landscaped” (Nayar 50). In *Bramayugam*, the space is half-ravaged by vegetation, which grows in the front yard, the courtyard, and through the walls of the broken roof. The pond is ill-maintained, leading to an overflow of water. The wilderness slowly takes over the identity of a *mana* seeded in the balance of the abiotic elements, trimmed to perfection, disrupting the image of an aristocratic household.

The *illam* tends to adhere to a strict regime of the “pure-impure axis” (Nayar 48). Women and other caste-members are strictly forbidden from entering most parts of the *mana*, which is exclusive to the male members of the family. Lower-caste people are restricted from even crossing the western entrance porch. Menstruating women and widows were strictly forced to live in a secluded room in the *mana* in earlier times. Even if these restrictions have been weathered down due to reformation movements, the so-called “impure” women are not allowed to be seen in the *poomukham* (front yard) of the *illam* (Nayar 42; Dili et al. 920). In the film, not only is the pure-impure axis shattered, but the axis is subverted. The *mana* is said to be built by Mayyanoor Thachan (“thachan” is the Malayalam word for a traditional carpenter) and holds many unexplored hallways. It is a space where Chathan lives and the *Yakshi* guards and/or visits. As Thevan is guided through the *mana*, a wide shot of the hallway exemplifies the uncanniness of living in a place known to drive the inmates mad. Having escaped *Yakshi*, Thevan embraces the roof over his head, even if it leaks. The entire construction and the layout match with a traditional *mana* in terms of its skeleton, but by adding symbolical excesses, the uncanny is brought out, which dethrones the space from the pedestal of glory.

The kitchen space houses an excess of eateries, utensils, and spices simultaneously impacting visual and olfactory senses (Shankar). There is a variety of potatoes hung on a pole and other root vegetables in the kitchen (Fig. 4); a bunch of coconuts are piled

up in the north-eastern corner; animals are trapped from the surroundings, which are recorded as excessive for three people who eat just once a day. In the place of a usual “morakam” to store buttermilk (Nayar 43), there is a winery stricken with the Gemino curse<sup>xiii</sup> (Fig. 5). Furthermore, the lack of maintenance of the kitchen deviates from the pure-impure axis as well. The floor is coloured with betel-nut spits, leftovers, rodents, and dirt, subverting the pure construct of an *illam* kitchen. Betel nut chewing, portrayed widely in the film, has been a part of urban culture in India from fifth to fourth century BC (Cielas 166). In the film, the cook is never seen bereft of this habit, which, according to Osborne et al, is associated with abuse and dependence, which tends to cause greater dependency if it contains tobacco (188). The recurring use can cause euphoria in the user, which helps one cope with the uncertain tension of the *mana*. The cook constantly chews and stains the kitchen floor in derision of the trapped state. This portrayal shows yet another uncanny aspect of traditional Brahmanism tainted with humiliation, which is relevant when Potti spits outside the spittoon, on the cook, because the cook interjected.



Fig. 4. Depicts the Eateries in the Kitchen, Rahul Sadasivan (dir.), *Bramayugam*, 2024. India. © Night Shift Productions, YNOT Studios.

The film’s architectural metaphors are rooted in a critical engagement with the *Vaasthu Purusha Mandala*, where spatial segregation mirrors caste and gender hierarchies. The *mana*, now overtaken by cobwebs, excessive grain, and rainfall, transforms from a ritual space into a haunted one. The “uncanny”, as theorised by

Freud and developed in “uncanny studies” (Jervis and Collins), arises here from the distortion of familiar caste-geographies. These are not just horror tropes but symbolic gestures of feudal decay and ritual redundancy. The disturbances of the spatial sense show both symptomatically and culturally pronounced affiliation with the experience of the uncanny (Jervis and Collins 4). As decadence is the excess of both culture and nature, it invokes the feeling of the uncanny, and the format of film materialises it through spatio-temporal bending (Jervis 18).



Fig. 5. Shows the winery inside the mana, Rahul Sadasivan (dir.), *Bramayugam*, 2024. India. © Night Shift Productions, YNOT Studios.

The *mana* is considered a structure of pride, hospitality, frivolity, and dignity established by the myths, legends, and narratives of the contemporary world, which bases its profit on these adjectives (“Naalukettu”). In *Bramayugam*, this image of a *mana* is broken by a constant juxtaposition of splendor and decay, prosperity and penury, the vastness of the *mana* and the portentous stillness. There is a perpetual chain of torture unfolding from Chudalan Potti, following a massacre by Chathan, Chathan punishing Potti and every guest at his door. The hospitality for a stranger initially seems confusing, given that the story unfolds in the seventeenth century amidst crude casteism. But, as the film progresses, the hospitality unveils itself as a trap, and Chathan, disguised as Potti, becomes increasingly ruthless. The devilish grin, the rattling of chains from the attic, hallways that smell of death, and the Chathan’s cackle

match with the haunted houses clichés. Gothic, as a genre that builds on symbolic excesses (Botting 1; Hillard 689), conveys the dilapidated state of the *mana* and gut-wrenching hegemonic system. A subaltern deity appropriated for the benefit of an ideology is used to write against the system and represent the decadence of the system as a whole, culturally and morally.

The precise soundscape and set design deployment break down the “authentic Kerala experience” marketed by the tourism sector (Nayar 47). The soundscape crafted by Jayadevan-Chakkadath employs a range of seemingly peculiar sounds, such as the voices of whales and rattlesnakes. Adding to this, the music director, Christo Xavier, has invented and remodeled instruments like the waterphone, didgeridoo, and brought in unique sounds that insinuate fear (Antony). Accompanied by the lyrics written by Dinn Nath Puththencherry and Ammu Maria Alex, the original score captures the uncanniness of the *mana* set in the seventeenth century, catering to the twenty first century audience. There are six music compositions, including the “Potti theme,” “Poomani Maalika” (Hymn 1), “Thambaye”<sup>xiii</sup> (Hymn 2), “Aadithyan Illathe” (Hymn 3), “The Beginning,” and “The Age of Madness” (Xavier). The main instrument used in the “Potti Theme” was custom-made by the music director with a plastic bucket attached to a guitar string (Antony). The strings were played using a violin bow, producing an unsettling tone with a unique reverb. A section is described as “the rap of *Pulluvan kudam*” (a folk instrument) in an interview with Cue Studio (Xavier) wherein the sounds from the *kudam* have been manipulated and matched with several other instruments such as the veena and the violin. The lyrics complement the songs and capture the pale mood by including animal and forest imagery with numerous hunting motifs. The soundscape helps to invoke an apprehension of the “presence,” enhances an affective disruption, and unseats Carnatic/classical associations with Brahminical power.

A notable difference discussed widely about the film was using the black-and-white lens to transport the audience to an “age of madness” coloured with casteism and feudalism. Director Rahul Sadasivan has mentioned that taking the entire movie in a monochromatic lens was a huge risk at the onset of production

processes (Sadasivan). But this decision highlighted the contrasts and added a visual language to the film. The decision to shoot entirely in black-and-white, much like Nolan's use of monochrome in *Oppenheimer* to signal objectivity, marks a historical dissonance—a past devoid of colour, both literally and ideologically. The choice heightens the uncanny and suggests that casteism and feudal decay are artifacts of a regressive past. The choice adds to the uncanniness as it brings “an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identities of objects and people . . . creating a parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses” (Gunning, quot. in Jervis and Collins 5). Furthermore, the film was shot in a 2:1 ratio to heighten the sense of being trapped inside the *mana*. The space, thus, transforms into a manifestation of “Bramayugam,” “the age of madness,” a decadent part of *Kaliyugam*, “the age of darkness,” which is currently unfolding as per the Hindu mythology.

The film's art director, Jothish Shankar, constructed the Kodumon mana by building a film setting out of the most gracious, age-old sets of the Malayalam film industry. He used 3000 grow bags to show vegetation colonising the walls, courtyard, and front yard of the mansion (Shankar), which was grown over four months to reach the required length. They used two separate mansions renowned for their architecture and heritage: Varrikkasari Mana and Olappamanna Mana. Both are situated in Palakkad, Kerala, and are marketed as tourism spots. The latter can be booked as a homestay using their official website. Varrikkasari mana was shown as a haunted house in *Drona 2010* (2010), starring Mammooty in the lead role. However, this film portrayed the space using the commercial horror genre unlike *Bramayugam*. By reconstructing the *mana* through the logic of the uncanny and rooting the horror in caste-coded trauma, the film invokes a historiographic counter-memory. The illusion of *mana* as cultural heritage is punctured. What remains is not nostalgia, but a palimpsest of struggles, appropriations, and hauntings.

Recent Malayalam cinema has shown an increasing willingness to engage more directly and critically with the structures of caste, moving beyond tokenistic portrayals or victimised subaltern figures. As V. K. Karthika argues, films such as *Puzhu* (2022) and

*Malayankunju* (2022) foreground caste-based violence in domestic and psychological spaces. These films dismantle the upper-caste patriarch's authority within the home, emphasising how structural and cultural violence sustains caste oppression through normalised intimacy and control. Similarly, Venkatesan and James' analysis of *Papilio Buddha* (2013) critiques the long-standing invisibilisation of Dalit identities in Malayalam cinema. This paradigm shift—from liberal-humanist redemption arcs to self-reflexive caste critique—signals a rupture in Malayalam cinema's historical allegiance to Savarna narratives. Malayalam cinema is undergoing a cultural reshuffling, where folklore is no longer a Brahminical domain but a contested site of memory, resistance, and revision. In Nirmal Sahadev's *Kumari* (2022), Chathan is portrayed as a vengeful and loyal deity protecting the tribal community and his allies by disorienting the Brahminical household through natural calamities and ailments. The folkloric figure in this film becomes a metaphor of the repressed resistance as well. Within this evolving context, *Bramayugam* joins a growing cinematic movement that reclaims narrative and spatial agency for the subaltern, not as mere victims or side characters, but as central, destabilising forces in the reimagining of Kerala's regional history.

### **Conclusion**

*Bramayugam* presents conflicting narratives of caste and religious power by drawing from both canonical and subaltern traditions. These narratives reflect the tension between upper-caste authored texts and oral tales from marginalised communities. The film foregrounds the figure of Chathan, a folkloric deity, and adopts elements of folklore not to valorise them but to reconstruct a familiar space—the *mana*—through tools often associated with Brahminical authority. By employing archetypes found in the text *Aithihyamala*, the film reorients them through visual and narrative strategies that shift their function and meaning.

The use of the “uncanny” is central to this reorientation. The *mana*, traditionally framed as a space of order, hospitality, and ritual purity, is rendered unsettling through its transformation into a site of spectral excess. This effect is achieved through monochromatic

visuals and a carefully composed soundscape that evokes a sense of historical distortion rather than clarity. Such aesthetic choices displace the symbolic purity of the *mana*, suggesting an inversion of the space's ideological structure. This process of spatial and symbolic inversion is extended further through the representation of the *mana* itself. By setting Kodumon mana in widely recognised locations such as Varrikkasseri mana or Olappamanna mana, and by modifying its interior with unfamiliar objects, vegetation, and arrangements, the film detaches the *mana* from its typical cultural associations. The breakdown of visual order, coupled with the presence of physical decay, interrupts the viewer's recognition of the space as an emblem of tradition.

The casting of Mammooty as Chathan, disguised as a Brahmin magician, complicates the semiotics of caste and performance. Given his established cinematic persona as a patriarchal figure aligned with order and tradition, his portrayal in this role introduces a layer of dissonance. This dissonance challenges the association of upper-caste aesthetics with dignity and control, and instead exposes their constructedness through narrative performance. *Bramayugam*, by drawing on regional myths and employing aesthetic strategies associated with the uncanny, participates in a larger discourse around caste, historiography, and cultural memory. Rather than constructing a new canon, it interrogates the assumptions underlying existing narratives and representations, particularly those surrounding space, authority, and identity. Its intervention lies not in resolution or endorsement, but in presenting a configuration where dominant structures are rendered unstable and open to scrutiny.

#### **Endnotes**

- i. Potti is a sub-caste among Brahmins.
- ii. Varahi is debated to be one of the Saptamatrikaas.
- iii. *Aithiyamaala* is a collection of stories from Kerala that covers famous people, historical events and supernatural tales.
- iv. A case was filed against the producers of the film for using the name Kunjamon Potti for the title character who practises black magic which led to the producers changing that name.

- v. Upasana is a ritual performed to appease a deity for long-term. It could be carried out for generations for protecting one's family.
- vi. Valluvar is a sub-caste belonging to the Paraya community of South India.
- vii. Malaya community is a mountainous tribe residing in the parts of Kozhikode, Kannur and Malappuram districts. <https://kirtads.kerala.gov.in/2017/10/11/malayan/>
- viii. *Maadanpothu* refers to tribal deities seen as 'lower' nature gods; the term combines *Maadan* (a tribal deity) and *Pothu* (a bull).
- ix. *Parambrahma* is a term from Hindu philosophy used to define the eternal being.
- x. Mythscape is a term to denote 'the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly' (Bell).
- xi. Kanni Koythu is the first crop harvest in Chingam (August–September in the Gregorian calendar).
- xii. The *Gemino Curse* from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* causes uncanny object multiplication, as seen with Helga Hufflepuff's cup.
- xiii. Thambaye is the second song in the film that describes the master or the landlord, who is deemed as the one who could vanquish all the difficulties of the world.

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