

# On children's films/ child-centric films of Navodaya by Jijo

April 2022 - details sought by

Dr. (prospective) Ms. Anupama for a thesis

1.

## **Padayottam 70mm - muslim child character.**

My first directorial venture had the '*chempaka poo vendey?*' muslim girl character only because it was suggested by Priyadarsan. Recommended by Lalumon\*, Priyan had come to assist in the 'Alexandre Dumas' story. Later, on becoming a Director/ Writer, Priyan had successfully turned these character punches into his hallmark style. I am grateful to him.

\* in 1980, when I was a 23 year old filmmaker, we had introduced Mohanlal - a 19 year old aspiring actor, in our film *Manjil Virinja Pookkal*. Those were the days when at the strike of the dawn, Navodaya Appachan, my Pappa - the producer & studio owner, woke us bunch of filmmaking kids in the studio dormitory. Mohanlal's cot was between Siby and mine. My mother and sisters, returning after their holy mass, served us morning coffee. Fazal and senior AD Stanley Jos were in the adjacent room. Fazil and Venu, veteran artistes and members of Kavalam's - our village thespian and stage director's drama troupe, had taught monoact/ mimicry to my two sisters for school youth festivals.



To films *Ente Maamattukkuttiyammakku*, *Kuttichathan* >>>

Padayottam failed to become a hit as our previous star-studded costume dramas. For instance -Thacholi Ambu, which was made as a cinemascope. Now, Anamorphic and 3D were technological ideas I mooted in our organisation on completing my physics graduation and entering the family business.

[pls refer to my resume <https://familiesjesus.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/jijo-profile.pdf>].

At that setback for our organisation Navodaya, my brother Josmon, instead of suggesting we go back to the successful format of 'Manjil Virinja Pookkal' - our experimental film just before Padayottam, insisted that we execute Jijo's other audacious idea - 3D. I am grateful to him for the confidence he reposed on me. But a 3D film should be another big blockbuster costume drama. Right? We had Kamalhasan's call sheet with us for a story-subject similar to DeMille's 'Buccaneer' under development at Navodaya during the said period.

Fazil, who then was writing *Ente Maamattukkuttiyammakku* and helping with the Buccaneer story, after seeing the 3D demos I brought from LA, said

"I think a 3D film should be a fantasy subject ... like the 1967 Tamil film *Pattanathil Bhootham* (The Brass Bottle, WB)".

Mathew Paul, another colleague showed me a letter his 8 year old nephew had written after seeing Padayottam. The child didn't like my violent film.

"We should make something the kids would love to sit and see" said Mathen.

"Aha!" I said " ... That means we should make something we would love to sit and see!"

This I think was a turning point in my filmmaking concepts. I discarded film formulae handed down to us from the past. So, for 3D, I took out our huge collection of comic books, Enyd Blytons, ... the then recent Hollywood - Spielberg's E.T. as another example, Malayalam children's literature of Mali (Madhavan Nair), etc. This you would find detailed in <https://www.navodayastudio.com/single-post/2017/07/03/illusion-memoir>. I just went back to my childhood. Incidentally, this also rubbed off on the film then under production - *Ente Maamattukkuttiyammakku*.

Citing the Kuttichathan myth known to all malayalees, I narrated to everybody around me one sequence as a possible production number. It was the Haunted Rickshaw - a cycle rickshaw propelled by the magical spirit goes around town! Everybody loved it. "Is there more such coming?" asked my first AD Siby Malayil. But something more had to wait till Siby brought around Raghunath Paleri to create more fantasy production numbers.

Which would mean, the making of a children's film in 3D - Kuttichathan (1984), was a commercial decision. Sure, it was daring. Those days (AD 1985) in north India (U.P., Rajasthan & Punjab), Chotta Chetan was not a raving hit as it was in the South. Asked the reason, the Senior General Manager (an elderly Keralite - Gopal Krishnan) at our Distributors - the iconic Rajshri Pictures, revealed to me that even the well-made child-subject Shekar Kapoor's *Man Woman & Child* film - MASOOM was not a hit in the North Circuits.

"Jijo-ji, my dear son, .... do you have any plans to remake your *Ente Maamattukkuttiyammakku* to Hindi? Forget it! But try your *Manjil Virinja Pookkal* - a love story (but without the heroine being married to the villain once). It may work ... like Prasad's *Ek Dujhe Keliye* - 1981, or our own film now being made *Maine Pyar Kiya* - 1989

2.

***Ente Maamattukkuttiyammakku*** was an accident or ... rightfully, a providence. We boys (No girls from conservative Kerala families would join filmmaking those days. Women - my cousins for example, would at best do Govt. or banks jobs) ... so we boys would sit and discuss possible film narratives. (Shooting

blanks in the Dark). Science Fiction from me, Modern Abstract literature from Siby Malayil, Khasakkinte Ithihasam and Kavalam Narayana Panicker rustics from Fazil.

Josmon, to harass us I suspect, occasionally would bring up infuriating subjects ... one of them surprisingly had become - *Manjil Virinja Pookkal*.

Yes, it was in 1980 April, Josmon read out a 'reallife ghost story' of a murdered woman which was published in a lowbrow Delhi women's magazine. Halfway through the text, Siby Malayil and Amaan (our in-house artist) started snickering.

Myself and Fazil brushed aside the ghost and caught hold on to the heroine's frame of mind - a young divorcee yearning for love. The subject was taboo then\*. But the magazine narrative hid the fact effectively till about halftime ... which Fazil and myself found fascinating. \* By virtue of the subject, the film was given an "A" - adults only, certification. A lady censor board member was vociferous to have the heroine's divorce proceedings depicted in the film. The rest is history.

Mid 1983, while shooting blanks during idle hours, only myself, Josmon and Fazil were there in the room. Fazil asked "Josumon, any more crap subjects we can improve upon?" .

Said Josmon ... "The Disney movie Annie (which was based on a hit Broadway Musical) got released recently and it has bombed!"

"Why" I asked

"Oh, it has the story track of a billionaire adopting child Annie from an orphanage ... and then a stranger comes claiming the child as his .... you guessed it, he is the villain ... come with false credentials ... to blackmail ... cliched ... cannot be redeemed"

Silence for some time.

"I got a new story" says Fazil. "A childless couple adopts a girl child. Then comes a stranger claiming that the child is his ..."

I scoffed " ... with intention to blackmail ... o.k., ... then?"

Fazil "..... No, Jijokutta, no no blackmail ..."

Myself "Uh?"

Fazil "No ulterior motives" (thinking on his feet) " ... his claim is genuine! .... the child is .... hmmm ... the child belongs to his wife .... and she is insane .... at home ... she had ..."

Myself, interrupting " No ... in a mental asylum .... we the audience gets to know this only when the stranger, to prove his point, forcibly leads us to the asylum"

Fazil "Wow! ... Jijokutta, where did you get that?"

Myself, peevishly "Paachi, it happened to me last week. Pappa took me to visit Bobachan. Pappa didnt say where we were going. And imagine my shock when I saw the name board '*Kusumagiri mental hospital, Kakkannad*' and realised the obvious!"

So myself and Fazil kept throwing story elements and completed a narrative in the next one hour.

By the afternoon, Siby Malayil when he came in, heard the story from Fazil in it's completed form.

"Whew!" He was wide eyed.

"Suppose this were a film script?" Asked Fazil, since that realisation didn't seem to have entered Siby's mind.

Siby demurred "Errr ... But how can you make a film on such a story? It doesn't fit any known format!"

That's when Pappa (Navodaya Appachan) suddenly called Fazil and asked about ongoing plans. Fazil abruptly narrated the story saying that it was an experimental tale ... may not be worth as a film.

"Well, ... it sounds good ... like some of the old surprise malayalam hits - *Ammaye kaanaan, Kannum karalum*, ..." said Pappa. "We never had child sentiments made into films for a long time ... worthwhile to pursue this subject."

\* I remember going to Ernakulam North to a cousin of Fazil who had a daughter, a prospective Maamattikkutti. Again to a Papa, I heard, narrating the story to Ammachi in the next half an hour. teacher's daughter at ToC-H school. Fazil, Jose and Siby at Dwaraka restaurant That's how the film came to be. \* invited an active child. None did work. Finally to our surprise, Pappa found her at Madras.

\* Locating the Child Actor was the hardest. Introducing baby Shalini, the credit goes fully to my Pappa who identified her. The performance of the child, a fair credit should go to her father Babu.

I remember the final script reading session at our home with family members and Staff.

While Fazil read the script, his wife Rosy was putting the new-born Fahadh to sleep on her shoulder.

During the shoot, Fazil was sometimes absent as he was organising his dad's Haj trip that summer. He would instruct me on his ideas for the scenes, and leave. I was in charge of the shots breakdown and frame compositions. When in doubt, to clarify, I would hold the shooting till Fazil was called from the



function at his home to the location. The shooting spots (while in Alleppey), were at Leo XIII (Seminary side), Dutch Mukku, Gujarati street, Komalapuram Spinning Mill ... etc. After Fazil would leave, with Siby shouldering the technicalities, I had to coach the child. I remember a re-introduction shot of Shalini (Tintu mol). Fazil had purposely kept her subdued in the orphanage intro scenes. To bring the child back into the narrative with a flourish, I suddenly got this idea and had Amaan - fretting as always at last minute improvisations, get some un-seasonal soap bubble blowers available only during festive *Mullackal Cherappu*. In slow motion, through swarms of bubbles blown by orphanage children, I shot baby Shalini flying a paper plane which lands at the foster mother-character's feet ... and thus the twain meet. Ashok Kumar the cinematographer was so enthused, he shot the whole scene in backlight. Fazil (six years my elder) hugged me after seeing the rushes.

The climax was kept open till the last day of the shoot.

Ten years earlier, it was Fazil who urged me to read the huge Reader's digest collection in the library of my cousin, his classmate - Boban Kunchako (actor Kunchacko Boban's father).

I would later tell Fazil interesting episodes from the vintage. One was the *Stolen Generation of Australia* - from which I justified Viji's comment below on how the story should end. Another was the story of a mother expectantly waiting - for the child given up in adoption - to return ... on which Fazil fashioned his film "*Nokkethaadoorathu Kannumnattu* (1986, Padmini, Nadia mOythu)"

It was during one of those shooting-site-discussions when B.R. Vijayalkshi - then Ashokkumar's cinematography assistant, today heading SaReGaMa, who said "why cant the child be given back to its own mother?"

After completing the climax scene of *Ente Maamattukkuttiyammakku* - a full dialog scene, where the stoic foster mother while driving the car explains to her weeping husband the justification of giving back the child to its inadequate mother, Fazil came out of the car after taking the travelling shot, and once again hugged me saying "Performed beyond my expectations ... this is going to be a great film".

.... meaning, the film, it just happened. And I just happened to discover I have a flair for 'a child's frame of mind'. How to extract performance from children .... Fazil, who had taught my young sisters mimicry and monoact, taught me the methods.

3.

***My Dear Kuttichathan***. The details on children's performance has been given in <https://www.navodayastudio.com/single-post/2017/07/03/illusion-memoir> .

The only addition I can give you Anupama, is how Rajeevkumar was put in charge of the child performers.

T.K. Rajeevkumar has a natural flair with child performers. He too comes from a professional mimicry background, and has been a direct competitor to my youngest sister Jisha, during college youth festivals. He would coax the kids by being with them for weeks before the actual shoot.

Aravind, Sonia and Suresh - the eldest 3 kids were accomplished film performers.

Aravind had got a national award for the one film he did before - Oppol.

Suresh had also got one national award.

Sonia was then more a dubbing artiste and she had done voice for Shalini in our *Mamattikkuttiyamma*. I noticed her facial expressions while dubbing, and casted her as the main character in *Kuttichathan*. There were always observations that she is too dark and south-indian in looks. Racist comments, I would say. A Pakistani theatre owner in London East Ham refused to extend the film beyond a week, commenting that the girl heroine is ugly. Yet Ilayaraja used to recall Sonia's "Ahhh..." expression, when her father reminds her "Today is your birthday!"

Now the great surprise was the youngest boy Mukesh. This was his first film (and also the only film).

There was tremendous pressure to replace him with Sonia's younger brother Tintu - an accomplished child actor. The reason being Mukesh was not film-trained. Rajeev, Art Director Sheker and Mathew Paul (who had located the boy from a friend's family), stood firm. They together made the boy perform so natural, it was a lesson for me in patience. It was similar to Spielberg's selection of his main child character - a performer was rejected initially by all, for film *E.T.*

The atmosphere in shooting *Kuttichathan* was like ... everybody had a whale of a time. Same as the audience in the theatre.

I had to get very involved with the performers only when the scenes were emotional ... or when Rajeev was not around. (the schedule was long, exhausting the first timers who had to take breaks). The

daughter-dad emotional scene in the demolished bar was one such. Here I didn't have a problem with Sonia, but with Dilip Tahil who would not turn his face away from the camera when Sonia's over-the-shoulder shots were taken! I already had trouble composing tight shots (a limitation for 3D), and with an adult performer throwing tantrums, saw me walk out of the sets. He came running behind, apologising. Some of Sonia's closeup expressions looked so nice, Editor Sheker sar (a guru to myself, Fazil, Siddique and Lal) would not reduce Sonia's reaction closeups. Contrary to film parlance, the director had to insist the editor to trim!

Now I shall come to children's behavior which I don't know how you Dr. (prospective) Ms. Anupama, would deal with in your thesis.

It is not pretty. At worst it is nauseating.

With rare exceptions, the child artistes are bound to become spoilt brats. This is due to the adulation/attention they receive. Boy Suresh got into a tiff with girl Sonia on a day Rajeev was not around. Suresh, though a boy with good upbringing by a good mom, surprisingly shouted abuses in public at Sonia. I boxed his ears (almost). His mom, I noticed, took him aside to scold.

Now Sonia's mother, and eventually Sonia herself, has facets that bring tears to one's eyes. Especially the sensitive Mr. Rajeevkumar. I shall not put this as text. Maybe verbal. If you are sure this nausea finds a place in your thesis. [But that too is part of the child's performance in films].

4.

**Onnu Muthal Poojyam Varey.** The first-time director Mr. Paleri was not very strong in dramatics. As a team we used to support the deficiency of a member. Asha Jayaram, the newcomer, a C.A. student, coming from a family of performers, could understand and internalize what Paleri would explain from behind his thick, inexpressive correction glasses. But not the girl child. And Rajeev, once again, was put in charge of training girl child Geethu Mohandas. After a long search, five year old Geethu had been located at Kochi Panampally Nagar when Art Director Sheker made a chance visit to the home of a classmate of his - Mohandas. By another chance, the home was near Rajivkumar's cousin's. So we went there to request. Is the child willing to act?

"Of course not" said the child, Geethu herself.

"Ah, I thought so ... never mind we asked" said myself, Jijo

Geethu "What do you mean?"

"Acting needs special talent. Jijo uncle says you don't have that" said Rajeev "How about proving him wrong?"

Geethu was game in challenging Jijo uncle and having him defeated.

For one month, she came out with us uncles - Jijo, Jos, Sheker and Rajeev to icecream parlors, fort Kochi waterfronts, etc. to get acquainted. This is a technique even today we use for grooming - for weaning the child out of its parents' influence ... who otherwise would start giving wrong 'acting classes'. Today we have professional acting instructors, women groomers. Then, only because Sheker and Rajeev were family friends, Mr. and Mrs. Mohandas let us take their child out.

But, whenever I asked her, Geethu would say she has no intention to act. Just that she wanted to help Rajeev uncle defeat Jijo uncle.

On Christmas Eve 1985, the child came out with me to buy a paper Christmas Star for their home. After buying the star at Ernakulam Broadway, we visited my sister Jissmol's family. This was one method for grooming child performers .. to get them into good company of other children ... so they become comfortable, lose inhibitions while scenes/ dialogs are coached. We used to take Geethu to our sisters' and cousins' homes in Ernakulam and have her spend time with the children on holidays. It was Xmas holidays and at Jissmol's place we bumped into my aunt Annamma Kunchacko - grandma of Kunchacko Boban, coming out of the house after a visit.

After pleasantries, my aunt noticed Geethu and enquired "... who is this child?"

I kept mum to see Geethu's reaction.

Holding on to the star, the girl retorted "Geethu, *sinimelu abhinayikkaan vannatha*". I still remember her expression. I understood the child had resigned herself to fate!

Now, the battle had only begun. Each time before a shot, over there Paleri would coach Asha Jayaram, and over here I would explain/ show how Geethu ought to act out .... and I would end by saying "Oh, it is not possible for Geethu, forget it!"

I would walk off in one direction and off Geethu would go with Rajeev in the opposite to prepare for the performance. I would return unenthusiastically to watch when the shot is taken. After the shot, Josmon would be the judge as to how the child's performance is rated.

Only rarely would Jose give poor marks. Mostly it would be "good!"  
 And Geethu would shout "Thoppichey, thoppichey, Jijo uncleney thoppichey". I would look peeved.  
 Geethu would crow "Jijo uncle chammi appiyittu!"  
 It took a lot of my 'chamma!' before the film got completed.  
 Rajeev casted Geethu in film Shesham - 2002 as heroine. He said that even after 16 years, sometimes he had to use the same technique to get Geethu's performance right.  
 ... meaning, to make the child perform or 'how to get into the mind of a child', for me it has always been a learning process. I learned from Rajeev, after what I learned from Fazil.

5.  
**Story of Jacob. Bible TV Serial. (1992)**

I was the episode Director for Story of Jacob (1992). We had difficulty getting good Hindi language performers down to the Pushkar desert. Especially child performers. Character of child Jacob, the one who wrangles out the birthright for a bowl of lentil soup from the elder Easaw, was especially tough. No adequate actor was yet located in Bombay (erstwhile Mumbai) by the casting directors.



During location scouting in Rajasthan, mid 1992, we were travelling by a RSRTC bus from Udaipur to Ajmer. Seated in front of us, there was a young family of three members. During the 4 hours long journey, I noticed the 5 year old boy trying to placate his mother for some mischief he was reprimanded for. He could easily twist his dad around his little finger. But not his shrewd mother. I could see him sit afar with his dad and make forlorn expressions whenever his mother's gaze fell on him .... and, recomposing himself to normalcy and carrying on with dad, as soon as her gaze turned away.  
 "Well, that could be our Jacob" I said to our production manager Akbar Khan, the Pathan.  
 "Please get their address. Maybe the parents would have seen Chotta Chetan".  
 The dad turned out to be an accountant at one of those gypsum plants in Kota.

Two months later, shooting at Pushkar, the casting directors had sent me an inadequate young Jacob. I sent Akbar to Kota with requests to cast the boy - young Kanwaljeet. The parents took leave and came. It turned out to be such a wonderful and mischievous young Jacob. Actor Mita Vashist, playing the role of Jacob's mother Rebecca, would wow after almost every shot  
 "My! where did you get this little imp?"  
 My 1st AD Suhail or the 2nd AD Aneesh didnt have to coach him dialogs. The boy was so natural!



6.

**Value-based short film - The Treasure (2009)**

Synopsis given - on webpage - <https://familiesjesus.wordpress.com/reallife-film-subjects-empathy/>

Identifying ISHA - the performer for the character of the young girl in the story.

Anupama, the shortfilm you can see as inset video at the bottom of webpage -

<https://www.navodayastudio.com/jijo-personal>



**driving miss first holy communion**

Even with a lifetime that spans just 10 hyperactive years, *Isha* with exuberant leaps has already managed to break her front teeth on the classroom bench and cut her nose on the home parapet. Pictured here above with MRT member *Jainul* and his kids *Abdul* and *Beeran*, *Isha* literally jumped into film acting in that September week of her first Holy Communion. She kept popping into the casting rehearsals which her father - professional photographer and MRT member *Shaju John*, was covering with his still camera. It was *Isha's* enthusiastic intrusion during the trials of those other aspirants that won the attention of *Ravi Varman* and *Sreenivas*. *Isha* didn't need any further inspiration to play the role of the principal 13 year old character in *Treasure*. A few pizzas, an *Imitation of Christ* booklet and a Holy Communion gown of her liking did indeed help. *Isha's* other interest is in helping her mother *Nimmi* - a software engineer, look after her infant brother.

7.

**Barroz 3D** (2019) - Guarding a Portuguese family treasure in Goa, an aged ghost finds that with the arrival of a 12 year old girl from Lisbon, his 400 years-long wait is about to end ... but only if he can convince her that she is the destined heiress.

**The Kappiri Myth** - Along the Malabar coast of India, since days of old, there is told a 17th century fable about a hidden treasure.

The story dates back to the maritime period when Portuguese seafarers sailed to India in their magnificent galleons and built forts, cathedrals in Goa. The fable says that the ghost of Barroz - the trusted servant of D’Gama, guards his family treasure. Down the centuries many people have attempted to find it – in vain.

**Isabella / Isa** – Goa. AD 1645. As thunder rumbles and cannons boom, Isabella is the terrified 12 year old sweet girl who runs into the protective arms of Grandpa Barroz. Come 2020, Isa is a wild cat who kicks and mauls Barroz the ghost when, during a fireworks display, he throws a protective arm around her. “Hands off, old man .... Scared of crackers, are you? ...Ha! Go hug your mom”

Both the roles - Isabella and Isa, are played by the same actor. Though outwardly she would seem hyperactive, Isa’s bouts of fantasy are an attempt to escape from uncomfortable realities. This is a paradox that lies hidden beneath the film’s facade of a fantasy tale. On the surface, this story is about how a young girl befriends ‘a treasure guarding ghost’ and along with the prankish grandpa, she has a whale of a time.

Yet below this rollicking surface lies the fact that Isa is more spooky and ghoulish than the real ghost! Following serious mischief and toxic misbehaviour at her Doon Residential School, Isa is presently under suspension. And dad Ron, busy with his casino business plans, is unable to provide remedial parenting.



Prithviraj as Ron Madhav. Parvati Rao as Susan Mathew.  
Shayala McFee as Isa/ Isabella



Chotta spins yarn



Amal as Chotta

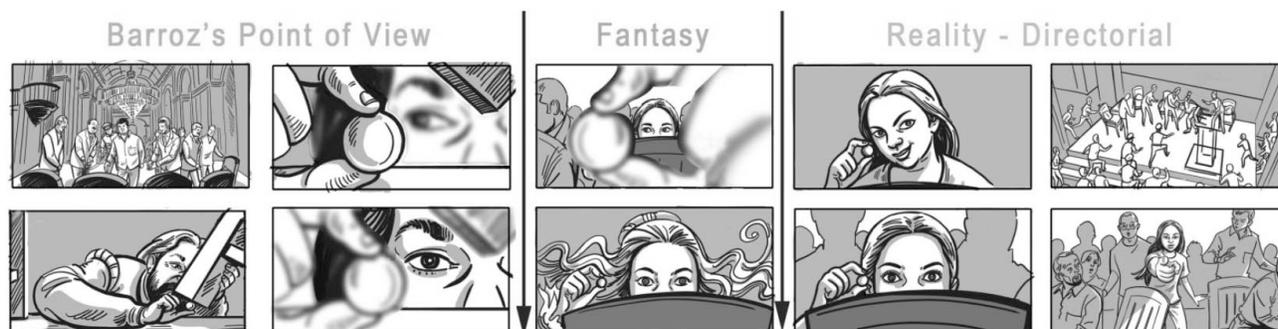
**Ron Madhav** – 38-year-old Malayalee entrepreneur of Indian origin now settled in California. With a bachelor's degree from Birmingham University, he is a successful real estate magnate. Fair, handsome and meticulous. But the steely business-like man of the world develops cold feet when faced with the emotional issues of his daughter. He is clueless as to his failure as a parent.

While studying in the UK, Ron had courted his colleague Theresa - a Portuguese national and married her. Isa is their only offspring. Today, having lost his wife and bearing the burden of single parenthood, a guilt-ridden Ron cannot face the accusing glances of his daughter.

**Susan Mathew** - A retired Malayalee diplomat, 65 year old. Susan and her late husband Mathew were local guardians to Ron Madhav when he was completing his studies in UK. A widow for the past 10 years, now settled in Goa, Susan is a humorous personality who even today continuously talks to her demised husband. Given such a behavioural aberration, no wonder the woman views Isa's bouts of fantasy with a sympathetic eye. Ron Madhav seeks Susan’s assistance in his daughter Isa’s behaviour problems. Susan in turn advises Ron how to be a better parent.

**Chota** - The 8 year old boy of Afro-Indian parentage has a fertile imagination. Evoking the nuances of the 'Kappiri Myth', holding a reed scepter in hand, every night the boy sleeps in a cardboard coffin of his making. That is how he gets insights into the hidden Portuguese treasure which his ancestors - seven generations removed, had protected with their mastery of voodoo occult.

My original screenplay proceeds on two planes –



\* There is a ghost, as in the Kappiri myth, waiting for an heir to return and claim the family treasure.

\* The ghost is a figment of imagination in the teenage girl's troubled mind.

This duality is not resolved even at the end, and hence it is open to the beholder's interpretation.

Since the story has an additional psychological plane, there are two alternatives in the screen narrative – fantasy/ reality. This was primarily motivated by a new generation of audience. Maya Mohanlal, Revathi Suresh, Althaf and young writers such as Samhita Arni came to contribute in making a unique film for Lalumon to direct.



. Sessions with Dr. C. J. John during early 2020 is proof of this involved development.

The duality of Isa/ Isabella is central to the narrative. Barroz is secondary. With the workings of Isa's mind on a parallel plane, I have 'layered' the story to keep engaged a new generation of youngsters who are today disinterested in cliché narratives. The script takes into consideration the 'new-gen intellect' and 'multiprocessing instincts' which is 21<sup>st</sup> century global.

My explanation on how we made children's films is being concluded here.  
Jijo

Answers - to your questions

[why Chota Chetan was not a raving hit in the North?](#)

As Shyam Benegal (I presume) once said ... for many in these northern states, cinema viewing is akin to going for a circus. At the circus, the entertainment follows a pre-determined pattern - with the performance varying only in style, not in content.

I was talking about those past decades. Now the audience taste is changing.

[Ente Maamaattikkuttiyammakku One thing I noticed is that when the couple is childless and sad, their house looks empty too. .... When the child comes home, the colour changes, a lot of things come into the house. Was that a conscious decision to show it like that?](#)

Of course, Fazil as the director had it in his head when situations and scenes came forth\* everytime from his mouth.

\* For the earlier film *Manjil Virinja Pookkal*, when describing the heroine's empty life, Fazil would narrate the barrenness and monotony of her surroundings. The scenes becoming lively and flowers-filled when the winter of her life changes to the spring.

\* While he was writing *Maamaattikkuttiyamma*, Fazil noticed the 'Mother Doll Rocking the Child Doll toy' his brother Khais had brought from The Gulf. Fazil incorporated the artefact as an important element in the script. A new piece could not be ordered, hence we used the one his brother brought. I had difficulty with Aman in making a dummy duplicate (sic) of the doll - fallen from the hands of the child got drowned - to show a dilapidated doll floating on water as the background for the credit titles.

The school bus that bypass their home with nursery rhymes fading in the distance ... empty, silent house inside - shown in wide, long shots ... the home getting filled as a child comes to reside ... noisy, lively, becomes the home - which is what a house with a child always is ... (I don't remember color changing. It was a red carpeted house, white draped, with wooden textured objects always) ... The school bus stops at the gate when the child comes. These ideas then came as 'holistic' concepts along with the visualisation of a scene\*.

Today a production designer contributes.

For *Ente Maamaattikkuttiyammakku*, there was no need for an art director. Amaan and a head carpenter executed the director's requests.

[I haven't found many books on children's cinema in India, and to my surprise](#)

I hope Ms. Anupama is not complaining .... for, it reminds me of a funny incident.

Take this lightheartedly ...

We were joined by many associates while in the business of 3D distribution and exhibition - personalities who were emotionally passionate about the film and the 3D technique. Oh, there were many, and they all enjoyed the very trying, tiring process of 3D screening along with us. Kothanda Ramaiyya (Kayar) our Tamil Nadu distributor, Ahmed Golchin (the father of UAE Cinema), Nitin Manmohan and Jhamu Sugandh - our Mumbai circuit distributors (of 1998 release) are a few.

Mr. Kayar called me during my amusement park days for the DTS version re-release in Hyderabad 1996. There was a press conference and questions were asked. Almost all of them being nonsensical, I parried them to Kayar. A humorous young man, he would give very serious answers to irrelevant questions and totally unrelated answers (like; how Rajnikanth and Chiranjeevi can see 3D without glasses) to the utmost stupid.

One young lady (maybe the Anupama of yesteryears) asked me the one single sensible question of the day.

"Sir, why aren't there more children's films?"

I said, maybe it needs more encouragement ... the children's filmmaking.

"Why didn't you yourself make more children's films?" She sounded indignant, complaining against me.

I said, I have done a few others in Malayalam, which she may have not heard of ... so, having done my share, I would suggest she address this unfairness to filmmakers here in their state (Andhra).

She wouldn't let go.

"Sir, 12 years ago, as a child, my parents brought me here to see your 3D film. Now today as an adult I am here to see almost the same film. How would it be if 12 years hence I have to come here with my children to see the same?"

I said "Ah, I am sure things shall vastly improve by then ..."

Suddenly Kayar quipped "One sure way to avoid that ... is for you to remain unmarried!" That is Kayar! Happily, the young lady laughed.

There was a young executive at Distributors Rajshri Pictures (Karan, I think) who had come down to Kerala to study the 3D Glass collection and distribution system. At Delhi Vishal Cinema, when he was explaining to the theatre management as to how after every show the glasses are collected and sanitised, there were scoffs and smirks all around.

"Saab, ye unke madraasi jagah pe ho saktha ... ye baath yehaam nahi chalega.

Zaroor, ... yehaam log chashma wapas nahin dega .. saley, kharab bhi kar dega"

To which the young exec answered

"Aisa nahin ... aap ye dhyaan rakhna ... yeh film Chota Chetan aisa hai ... dekhne ke baad log pyaar ke saath apne apne chashma vaapas dega ... Zaroor"

[Satyan - Baby Vinodini combo ... the use of childhood innocence ... Prem Nazir-Baby Sumathi ... Mammootty- Baby Shalini](#)

You used the term 'innocence'. Not really, because we have to take into consideration the off-screen narratives - the ones behind the camera, if you really mean this to be a thesis. So my question to you would be how would you address the most horrifying of human base instincts in this? Think and tell me.

[Was there ever a Navodaya style?](#)

Not really. We never made that many films. Udaya made 100 films in 30 years. We hardly made 10.

I think each film was unique for us. Hence the production design and methodology were unique to every

picture. Udaya almost always maintained a couple of same teams. We had more freshers coming in frequently than at Udaya.

Could you tell me how the aspirations of Navodaya, of its young people, including you, were different, if they were?

I don't know how different our aspirations were as compared to other filmmakers of those days ... because, unlike today, the industry was a closed system where outsiders didn't know how films were being made. Those who got inside, did it through some connections with personnel in the industry. And they had to apprentice under some masters before establishing their talents.

You ought to realise that during the closing years of the 1970s - the time I entered the industry, there were hardly any technician in the mainstream cinema who had graduated from Poona - the only celebrated film institution in our country.

So, how different was ours?

Before that, one has to analyse how were the others in Malayalam cinema. Every filmmaking organisation was commercially focussed - which means formula oriented. Manjilas Ouseppachan (our relative), Supriya Pothan (our family friend and Papa's protege), a carefree Babu sait (of Chemmeen, Kanmani) were among the few personalities who had passion for meaningful films. The backbone of Malayalam films those days was **Malayalam Literature**. And these producers I mentioned were well read. Hence they made films that turned out outside that of the standard formulae. One change that was happening in the film field was I.V.Sasi films, but that too became standard masala by the time I came in. K.G.George had not yet become acknowledged as bankable.

I didn't make any conscious effort. But after proving myself as competent (at least technically) with cinemascope (Thacholi Ambu, again a mainstream film) I did insist for changes ... and for that I brought in Siby Malayil (my mother's friend's son, senior to me by an year in Leo XIIIth School) who was an 'activist' in film societies. Also, Fazil (Mimicry and Stage) to initiate changes. Once that proved successful (Manjil Virinja Pookkal becoming a milestone), it became a routine to inculcate new talents for every project.

My brother Jomon and my sisters were very, very supportive.

Ammachi would remain neutral (I think she used to plead my cause to Papa in private)

Papa was reluctant.

Oh yes, Papa was always reluctant to take up my ideas because it almost always clashed with the establishment. Especially since he was the Film Chamber President.

There were clashes. But he used to relent and I would end up apologising; also learning the wisdom of his actions in the process.

**1979.** When we kids came up with the idea to make film with newcomers, there were no Navodaya films made without Prem Nazir. Jayan was the rising star we had helped make. So a natural choice for film *Manjil Virinja Pookkal* would have been Prem Nazir in hero role and Jayan as villain (please don't laugh). Our distribution manager - Francis, would certainly demur if the cast of a proposed film is not starry enough ... because, the theatres would be reluctant to give exhibition dates. We also used to get advances as funding from theatres once the dates were confirmed (Even when the film under discussion had not yet started shooting). With about 120 Malayalam films every year, it was an exhibitor's market those days. And only a Prem Nazir film could assure theatres for Francis.

Papa was intimately friendly with every theatre owner and *even their families* - Shenoy's, Kunjippalu, Viji & Shaji, Thomaskutty, Reddiar, ... with decades of allegiance, he never changed theatres.

[At Quilon, when Musaliyar's Grand theatre was not equipped to show Padayottam in 70mm, papa never even considered to screen it in Priya 70mm - a competitor theatre. When Pappa broached the possibility for Grand theatre upgraded to 70mm, a reluctant Musaliyar himself suggested Priya theatre. Seeing his great friend Musaliyar's eyes moistened, Pappa stuck with Grand theatre with a 35mm cinemascope print].

I was aware that some years earlier, my cousin Boban Kunchacko (8 years elder to me - remember, his collegemate was Fazil), being young in blood, mooted ideas to make Udaya films sans Prem Nazir. Film subjects proposed by his friend Bharathan - aspiring to become a director while doing Art Direction for film *Ponnapuram Kotta* (1973) and very affable to Kunchacko, must have inspired Bobachan for sure.

Without Sathyan, only Prem Nazir was the then bankable star.

Madhu broke even in only about 30 percent of his films. \*I remember 'Sisirathil oru Vasantham' by Kayar.

Almost all films with newcomers\* inevitably flopped. P.N. Menon's *Chembarathy* 1972, and Kamalhasan starrer *Madanolsavam* 1978 were exceptions. Also Bharathan's *Thakara* 1979.

\* The real revolution *Manjil Virinja Pookkal* caused was not in film aesthetics; but in theatre circuits. Disproving Francis's own prediction that the film may not be as successful in B, C centres as in the A, it in fact did better - becoming a rage in small-towns of Kerala. It had to do with songs becoming major hit with a young audience.

But Francis had the collection data to show that these films didn't do good beyond the first 20 'A centres'\* - major towns of Kerala. There were still about 150 others - small towns and villages, left to recoup a film's production cost and profit. Hence, Boban Kunchacko's efforts were squashed by his father - Kunchacko, my papa's elder brother.

"Other producers pine to get Nazir Sar's call sheet ... and here you are disdainful of the privilege he is kind to give us?" So nobody ever thought of replacing Prem Nazir.

And we (when part of Udaya) had glorious hits like *Aromalunni* 1972, *Kannappanunni* 1977 - with Prem Nazir. But then there were also deplorable bombs like *Neelapponman* 1975 - where Prem Nazir played a Russian Doctor (!) and *Ma Nishadha* 1976 - where he played a Kathakali performer.

But 1979 was different. After the hit *Thacholi Ambu* 1978 - my technical triumph of sorts, I walked out from Navodaya filmmaking scene to pursue studies. Everybody - Papa, Josmon then doing his C.A., my sisters completing their college, Ammachi, the staff at Navodaya - Francis, Anand and Aman ... all of them knew that I was not keen on film *Mamankom* 1979 which Papa was repeating in cinemascope format. Yes, it had Prem Nazir and Jayan. Released for Onam 1979, it bombed (released against our family friend Geo Kuttappan's *Ezhaam Kadalil Akkarey*). So, everybody above suggested Papa to call me back for the next project. I remember Ammachi and Josmon coming to my I.I.T. tutorial centre to call me home. I remember my first meeting in a year with Papa, as he sat with failure written on his face and the *Mamankom* daily collection report in front of him. Contrary to what people perceived about him, my Papa was a taciturn, intensely private man. He wouldn't exhibit emotions. He was like his mother - a lady from Palai, married to Kuttanad (*kizhakkam chora* as they would call it).

I was definitely feeling smug and arrogant on facing my downhearted papa.

But I was soon down to terra-firma.

Having been to Madras for the previous two years and heard Kodambakkom stories and having derived meaningful lessons others before me had failed to heed, I had time to think. (Usually I jump first, and think later)

As in Shekar Sar's advice on money & fame, there were other tales - instances of hundreds of un-lauded disasters Kodambakkom has had for every successful one known to the world ... and was applauded.

The relevant ones for me in this context were 'the new brooms who came in to sweep clean, and failed'.

Gemini Empire's scion Balu was an example.

There were many others ... inside the film industry and out there in the corporate world.

Why, even my cousin Boban was an example cited to me by my mother, whenever I exhibited arrogance. Pride, she said, goes before a fall.

Having went over and over, analysing all revolutions in history, one of the lessons I had learned was that "The path to hell is paved with good-intentions"

Meaning, my good intentions alone would not suffice to make the drastic changes I propose translate to better films being made - commercially or artistically.

Papa used to say about his brother Kunchacko's very first partner in moviemaking - Koshy.

Together, before papa's arrival, they had produced *Jeevitha Nauka* - 1951 in the banner called K&K Productions at Udaya Studios. Their partnership falling out, Koshy sar's sons, with lofty principles, took over his resources to make a new-gen film of those days - *Puthradharmam* 1954, and they just disappeared into oblivion.

Papa, came in to assist Kunchacko for film *Avan Varunnu* 1954, stuck to the same old formulae in vogue. And with his brother made history for the next quarter of a century.

Though papa with this incident was advising me that 'old is gold', I took only the lesson of prudence from it ... and took it to heart.

And prudence was what Fazil also advised during fall 1979.

(Holy Eucharist everyday morning also helped me discern a cautious approach).

Fazil told me that, if after a failure - such as *Mamankom*, we are seen to change course, then it would amount to cowardice.

"Ask papa to make one more superstar film immediately .... and we youngsters should join to help in it" said Fazil. How '**all encompassing**'!! - today I look back and wonder.

So that was film *Theekkadal* 1980. With Papa directing Nazir, Madhu and Sukumaran. Myself doing what I did for *Thacholi Ambu* and also teaching Siby and Fazil the filmmaking technicalities I had learned with *Thacholi Ambu*. Fazil writing the script.

Shot again in Cinemascope, released for Vishu 1980, *Theekkadal* came second to I.V. Sasi's super duper

hit Angaadi - which saw the hero Jayan established as a superstar. Jayan for the first time didn't join a Navodaya film as he was busy with very many others. He would meet his sad end by that November, even before our *Manjil Virinja Pookkal* got released.

Post Vishu 1980, after *Theekkadal*, when the subject of *Manjil Virinja Pookkal* got finalised, everyone at Navodaya was keenly watching me.

So I said "This time only new performers ... no, not in Cinemascope ... 35mm academy with our new high speed lenses .... and, ... Fazil shall direct"

"Why not you direct, Jijokutta?" Francis was being more loyal than the king ... I mean, the prince.

I said again "Fazil shall direct. Period!"

Ah, then there came a U S returned musician called Jerry Amaldev .... I recommended him ... though Fazil reluctantly confirmed him after many many sessions ... after at least 4 songs were found listen-worthy. Fazil and Siby's choice was M.B. Sreenivasan. Yet Fazil relented. He agreed to have a debutant music director as he himself was debuting.

The reluctant Papa, seeing the writing on the wall, first informed the plans for a new venture to Nazir sar himself!

"Kollaam, nalla kaaryam alley Appacha!" That was Nazir sar\*.

He even blessed the switch-on ceremony.

Pappa, before announcing this venture with a new cast, called all his theatre associates and told them of the Blockbuster Star-studded 70mm Folklore film he was planning to produce next. Even I didn't have any idea what that was! (Eventually it turned out to be *Padayottam* 1982)

"This is to ensure that nobody would shy away from giving dates for *Manjil Virinja Pookkal*. They shall accommodate it in anticipation of another Thacholi Ambu" said papa.

\*\*

Whenever we meet, even after 42 years, I remind Central Pictures' Viji (son of Georgekutty of Theatres Asha, Abhilash and Rajmahal of Kottayam) of the unfairness he meted out to my film *Manjil Virinja Pookkal*. In one of the greatest blows to me then, he terminated the film after a week at Abhilash! That was when we were desperately trying at all 16 release centres to tide over the film's low attendance during its initial days. Viji's subsequent pacification - that the film gloriously ran 11 weeks at the nearby Changanassery in their own Abhinaya Theatre - I never accepted. In the ensuing years, whenever Viji used to ask me "Jijo, is your next project a big super-starrer? ... Does it have Mohanlal?" I used to taunt him "Oh Viji, so you need Mohanlal now! Unlike when we first starred him!"

Now it was Singer Jesudas (Dasettan) who during papa's funeral gave a correct assessment of Papa's role here in this world.

(Copy. Paste)

Dasettan was always very reverential to my Papa from one of his first 'Bharya film song *Dayaparanaaya Karthave*'. He used to always call Papa 'Kochu Muthalaali' - half in jest, because Kunchacko was 'Valia Muthalaali'. Pappa always addressed him 'Yeshuvey'.

Jesudas in an obituary noted that the relationship between Kunchacko and Appachan was like the mythological brothers Raman and Lakshman. Kunchacko proposed and Appachan executed.

The techniques and tactics of surviving in the film industry, Appachan had learned in serving Kunchacko. And what he had learned in 30 years at Udaya, Appachan put to good use with his Navodaya. In bringing new talents, new technology and new films by youngsters ... which no other person could have had done.

I have to admit that if it were not for Navodaya Appachan - my papa, I could have never done Cinemascope, 3D, 70mm. It would have been impossible for anyone to popularize all those films you credit me with - *Manjil Virinja Pookkal*, *Mamattikkuttiyamma*, *Onnu Muthal Poojyam Varey* ..... Every father-son relationship is a complex and difficult one. Today I have strong criticisms against my father who, in *Naaranathu Bhraanthan* fashion, during the last two decades of his life, laid waste what we had built up in less than one. But I have no complaints. For, my Papa's shortfalls do not invalidate his many good deeds. I take everything as a package from God. I cannot pick and choose.

[Could you tell me how the aspirations of Navodaya, of its young people,](#)

We are talking of an era - 1980s, when aspirations were different. I remember an aged aunt from a small town in Kerala explaining the attitude of her sons in comparison with her Bombay-resident-cousin's sons. "*Meesha undaayeenu vechu enthu kaaryam? ... vallayidathum karangaan pokum ... evidunnengilum valla mangayo, kappayo kittiyal thinnu nadakkum. Vishakkumbol veettillottu varaan polum vevalaathiyilla!* ..." meaning, they were carefree when compared to their cosmopolitan cousins.

True, there was a Gulf Dream then for a large percentage of Kerala male youth. But an obsession to achieve was not there among Keralites as we see today. Today, the anxiety and aspirations of young adults are global. It transcends state borders and gender divides.

\*

Pappa for some reason held a mistaken notion that I had low opinion of Nazeer sar. This in spite the *evergreen actor* gave one of his best performances for my *Padayottam*. Also despite hearing me say 'Prem Nazir just as MGR are great not as actors; but as exceptional human-beings'. So when I suggested Nazir Sar do the '**3D glass instruction**' for Kuttichathan, Pappa said "Oh, so you do hold him in high esteem!"

Hence it is no exaggeration if I state that 'All newcomers to Navodaya were actually sought out by Navodaya itself, and invited towards the discipline of filmmaking ... some of them were dragged kicking and screaming, while some required cajoling of their parents and convincing that this is a respectable profession. (For example, Art Director Sheker at age 26. My Papa went to see his aunts many times at Trivandrum and became family friends - sharing homemade pickles and parental histories - before Sheker could come to Alleppey without the pretexts he had to invent every time for not being home for 3-4 days!). Can you imagine that today, for film aspirant young adults?

I shall quote an interview once Rajeevkumar gave ... (copy. paste)  
Director Rajeevkumar of Malayalam Cinema (Kerala) recalls the environment which helped him become a filmmaker.

"In 1983, here I was suddenly one day at Navodaya Studios!  
On recommendation from Mathew Paul who was then apprenticing to become a film director at Navodaya, I was invited by Jijo after hearing about my mimicry talents. In the ensuing months when I started involving myself in the filmmaking activities at Navodaya, neither they nor least of all me knew what I was destined to become. But what I can today say is - the institution of Navodaya which in the span of a few years contributed dozens of celebrated personalities (directors, writers, actors, art directors, musicians) to Indian Cinema was a healthy interactive surrounding where we developed our Skills".

But then like you said Navodaya also discarded the formulae of the past.

Though I was casted in 11 films as child actor - age 5 to 11, (Bharya, Bhagya Jathakam, Rebecca, Ayisha, Inapravukal, Jail, Thilothama, Mainatharuvi Kolakkesu, Kasavuthattam, Susy, Pearl View) I never was keen to be at a shooting site or at the Udaya Studio floors. Even when I took enthusiastic classmates to Udaya for them to see film shootings, I would find refuge in the Sound Room with RCA recorders and large valve amps, or at the camera optical dept with big lenses, or at the film chemical lab. After my graduation, I entered films to help my papa make 'Kadathanaattu Maakkom' (1987). Since I didn't know 'filmmaking', I stood back and observed. Enlightened, I took over with the next - the first cinemascope ... and dislodged a few icons in the process. When I suggested different film-content-generation during the said Thacholi Ambu, there were some ardent supporters for me among the Navodaya staff. (They were fiercely protective towards me too, at my age of 21. For example, our Production Exec M.K. Anand would give me ample berth to help actor Jayan become what the star ultimately became ... but the very instance some smut talks - a prerogative of the male stars - started, Anand would step in to caution Jayan, and subtly drop hints of the devils that lurk around in the film industry)  
But even they who were cheerleading my efforts, out of grave concern for me, would remind me about 'cardinal formulae' (Udaya Style, you said?) that had been tested over time.  
(Oh, those were the days *Sankarabharanam* and *Madanolsavam* did dazzling performances at Ernakulam theatres. But it was limited to only that one centre or a few. The prudent accountants of all distribution companies - ours included, had statistics to cite what went in favour of formulae films at the B, C centres which was what ultimately justified a film's investment)

This happened when we were completing our first two films at AVM Studios Chennai.  
Seeing me troubled in thoughts, veteran Udaya editor Sheker Sar, realising the reason for my discomfiture, asked me as he continued snipping film strips and chewing paan ...

"Enthaa Jijokkuttaa ...? Avarellaam parayunnathu kettu varuthamaa (disturbed)?"

I retorted "Saar, if there are only a few well established correct ways of making films .... then what am I doing here?"

"Hmmm ... " said Shekar Sar after a long spit "... come, we shall go meet Meyyippa Chettiyar Muthalali"

He took me to the great A V Meyyippa Chettiyar - sitting retired and relaxed in his office.

Pappa had around that time, from an import consignment from LA to AVM Studios, purchased a Moviola Editing Machine from Meyyippa Chettiyar for our future studio. Shekar Sar from AVM staff came to know and had informed papa about the consignment which had a few spare machines. Chettiyar graciously agreed to the request.

Shekar sar introduced me as the nephew of his friend - the late Kunchacko muthalaali, and requested Mr. Chettiyar "Muthalaali, can you tell us the success formulae behind all AVM films?"

Taken aback, the veteran laughed.

"Why laugh, Sir?" Sheker Sar with full seriousness listed out the famous hits of AVM - from *Sreevalli* to

*Major Chandrakanth to Samsaaram adu minsaaram.* "These are no films to laugh at" Without stopping laughing, the greatest film-businessman of India started reciting his notorious flops. "Ean Shekar? the ones you said, I never expected to be hits ... but the ones I named now, everyone thought would become sure hits ... the alangaaram (aura) seemed so" "Enough Sir" Shekar Sar got up while saying "I just wanted you to say this to Jijokuttan here".

Walking back Shekar Sar said "Jijokutta, there are no sure ways to make commercially successful films. You do what you feel right, follow your passion, continue to keep doing that, conduct yourself as advised by your parents and teachers, .... *appo yellaamey athu paattukku unkitte varum* (then, fame and success are what that shall come to you, incidentally!)" Startled, I thought "Hey, that is a gospel verse, not a business dictum!" .... for, Jesus had said "Seek righteousness ... the rest **shall be added** to you". Meaning, both money and fame are **byproducts** in your efforts ... never the end result. I knew it made sense ... hence I followed the passion alone - not the formulae - in making films from that day.

But then, I am a man of science.

There is no theoretical basis in saying that *it is wrong to seek money and fame!* What logic is there in that ... other than lofty words?

I would be unfair to the Divine if I don't state here the answer He gave me years later.

I had sought a technical answer. I got that answer. It was given to me.

Deep in the heart of the theory of quantum mechanics, there is a thought experiment - of measuring a particle's velocity and position *simultaneously* at any given instance.

It is impossible!

And that led to the famous argument between Neil Bohr and Albert Einstein in either proving or disproving the conjecture.

I shall state it briefly as to why it is impossible -

Measuring the position alters a particle's velocity. Measuring the velocity alters its position.

The dynamics when pursuing money and fame is strikingly similar ...

The instant you 'look' at fame and money, i.e; when you process in your mind the means to achieve them, ... then, *it alters your frame of mind itself* ... diverting your perceptions away from the intended end - in this case creative filmmaking.

This, only The Designer Himself can reveal. The One who wrote the Human OS.

Fame and Money should always remain at your peripheral vision. Never, ever, look at them directly.

'Formula filmmaking' is sought by persons looking for money, fame and instant glory.

[how the aspirations of Navodaya ...including you, were different](#)

Some of my colleagues - the ones who don't know me well - sometimes ask me "Jijo how can you remain without making films?"

I had to explain this once to cinematographer P.C. Sreeram who had become famous with our tamil film "*Poove poo chooda va*" - 1985 and has today become the foremost cinematography guru in the south. He is also the only one person I envy ... because he has many, very many disciples ... more famous than himself!

I told "Sreeram, every passionate filmmaker we know ... cannot exist without making films ...you included! But I belong to a different category. For me, **film also happens to be one among my passions**. I came by accident into this because I had to help papa in our family business. Today I can afford not to make films for a livelihood. My passion has seen me moving on to ... amusement parks, museology, Indian classical music, writing ... and Ah! Spirituality. I like doing what I am comfortable with ... and God seems to concur".

But could you tell me more, like how you were instructed to act, what the set was like, and did you enjoy that as child?

The very first memory of mine about acting was in 1961 when I was 4 years old.

**Film Krishna Kuchela.** Sometime in the morning, the Udaya Studio Auto-Rickshaw decorated for film publicity purposes came to my nursery school - St. Joseph's by the Canossian Sisters. It created a sensation among children - more than the Benz and Chevrolet cars that dropped and picked up some of my friends - more affluent kids of Alleppey citizenship. The irony was that this vehicle was used to buy fish, vegetables and provisions for the studio and was returning from the local market. Yet, decorated garishly, this plywood contraption like a small elephant standing on an auto-rick chassis, it had on it the pictures of the film-stars hand painted to announce the coming Udaya film. All the more prominent was its arrival announced by the noise it made (amplified by the wooden body).

This was something not just me, but my 3 siblings also enjoyed (or suffered - depending on the age and thereby the reaction of our classmates) during our entire school days.

It is pride when you are young, but embarrassment as you grow up.

That day at the Canossian Nursery School, the vehicle had come to pick me up for an acting assignment!

The next thing I remember was the makeup and costume personnel - Velappan, Raghavan and assistants fussing over me to make me Unnikrishnan. I was adorned with curly wig, a stone studded brooch on it, bracelets on arms and the signature peacock feather - as you see young Krishna in the calendar art. It was getting very uncomfortable. There was a lot of "oohs and aahs" ... a bit too much for me to become suspicious. The experience of sitting on that makeup chair before the illuminated mirrors was not very different from that at a dentist's chair ... waiting in fear of the injection needle!

By this time my Ammachi, Baby Punnoose, recognising my discomfort and anticipating an imminent breakdown of affairs, moved closer to me from the background and laced with "Ooh, enthoru shela!"s... applauded my yet to happen performance as the young Krishna.

It definitely looked like a conspiracy to me.

Now, children are not that stupid as the adults take them for.

When you are being offered something likeable as an ice-cream, there is no need to hype it up. Doing so would make it obvious that a bitter ginger syrup or a castor oil is coming behind.

The ear studs were the last straw. Enough! I called it quits. Pulled out wig, brooch and all, before anybody could restrain, threw them away and bawled for going home.

I never got billing in the film *Krishna Kuchela's* credit titles.

Because I never acted in it.

Back to school the next day, with the residual makeup on my face, I got ridiculed. "Lipstick! Like a girl!"

This was a phenomenon that got repeated all through my yet to come acting career. Low contrast B&W film stock of those days necessitated accentuation of facial color and texture with makeup for films. In fact, it was different makeup for a color film from that of a B&W film, and different for different color stocks.

My non-acting in Krishna Kuchela had very heavy consequence in the ensuing days. Ammachi would shame me in front of all my cousins for squandering away the wonderful opportunity any child would jump to embrace.

(One other thing I noticed at the periphery of my vision was that papa was making immediate arrangements for a replacement performer as I was tossing out my wig. Which means, he was ready for such an eventuality. 20 years later, I too would be ready with plan B, C, in all filmmaking logistics)

So when the next time the challenge came for acting in film "Bharya" 1962, I was ready to prove my acting talent and all my detractors wrong. (Some shades of this in how we made Geethu Mohandas act in "Onnu muthal poojyam varey"?)

Anupama, I am cutting it short here. I have had idle time to write this while in Chennai recuperating from a bout of gout. I am now being called to attend a crucial Barroz scene where my presence is needed.

I am noting captions of elements in this topic so that they can be told in zoom call - say; after 15th April.

Papa pinching me to cry on camera.

Always stay with Seethakka, josmon, parents.

Going to sleep on bed on take.  
Sathyan sarinodu mindilla.  
Nursery School shoot with Murali

Being mobbed on first day in primary school.  
Poovankozhi Muttayidum, Kaduppathil Chaya. Achan Karanjai Njanum karayum.

“Sinimelu abhinayicha kutti!!”

Bhagya jathakam -

There was a film in which myself, Jijo, acted just after film *Bharya*. Film *Bahagya Jathakam* (Nazeer, Sheela) with hit song ‘Adyathe Kanmani’. It was not a Udaya film - though portions were shot in Udaya Studios when a strike at Vijaya-Vauhini Studios, Kodambakkom saw its shooting urgently shifted to Udaya.

I haven't seen this film. Some scenes from this would have been cut out and not be seen in versions available today on the net. This is true for many old films - such as *Bharya* (I've noticed). Either the 3 hours home video tape limit/ 90 minutes Beta tape limit, or subsequent edits by Home Cable TV Channels, would have permanently removed portions from many films of yesteryears, we get to see today. On Mrs. Molee Boban's insistence, in 2004, I myself had to do an edit to fit into 2 - 60 minutes cassettes, Udaya's vintage film *Agni Mrugam* (Hounds of the Baskervilles - Sherlock. Doyle) when the TV rights she sold it to Asianet. Navodaya's Edit Suite did the film to video transfer.

Film Rebecca poster disgrace  
Film Ayisha - Nazeer, Sheela, Kunchacko. Badr UI Munir.

Inpravukal song was given in pdf. Funeral car logistics. Ithiri ppoovalan song.  
Throwing muck on papa's dhoti

Baby Vinodini in film Kadalamma. Noticing character/ fragility - changes. Bobachan as example.

Film Jail. Jissmol walks in.  
Film Thilothama not facing Sathyan in same shot.

Film Mainatharuvi. Alummood.  
Kasavuthattam. Without glycerine. Lost English exam.

School adulation, ridicule, 6th std. Hindi sir's eyes lights up. How faced harassment and ego.  
School trip to see Dosti

Poove poo chooda va - child molestation!  
Some incidents cannot be written down. Can be discussed on Zoom. You may have to use discernment in narrating the dark matter in your thesis.

Rajeev's Jalamarmaram, Jude's Left Unsaid.

[Also, as a child did you go to a lot of films with your family? Could you tell me how the film viewing habits were at that time.](#)

We children were rarely taken for cinemas. Every film had to be whetted before being taken to. Most memorable are those trips from Alleppey to Ernakulam for seeing English films - Sound of Music, Mad Mad World, God Bad Ugly, Patton, Starwars, etc. I was not keen to see films when I was young. Emotional scenes, ghost scenes, tragedy, loud music scores ... all these scared me. Jomon was fearless in that aspect. So, till I entered high school (age 12, year 1968) I would be asking Josmon the story of the film he saw the previous day, from which I had stayed back home. I remember him spinning yarn by giving me a different narrative (and songs of his making!) than in the film he had seen. This I would realise only much

later ... by that time I was in appreciation of his talents, and also the analytic realisation as to how imaginative children can be.  
Even today I can say I have seen far less films than an ordinary filmgoer. My knowledge on films comes from reading habit.

We were restricted interacting with film stars. Or even accompanying film stars to the local theatres for film viewing.

On how we children were shielded .... Some moral issues are dealt in my diary <https://familiesjesus.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/sexuality-morality.pdf>  
Some addition to the said diary is given here

I remember my childhood visits to Udaya Studios Alleppey ... the visits that became less frequent as 'daily-study-load' increased. Most of my time would be spent at sound department in the midst of the arrays of RCA valve amplifiers mounted on the room walls ... and sometimes with the Photophone PM-45 Optical Recorder while engineer Cheenu (Sreenivasan) from Madras came for services. Then there was the Moviola Editing Machine room, the B&W film laboratory where the dark rooms were inaccessible and mysterious. I would sometime accompany my cousins to the studio to see shooting at the floors ... and that was when we children hung around in the company of performers - filmstars like Prem Nazeer, Sheela, Ummer ..... and many of the supporting casts like Thikkurissi, Adoor Bhasi, ... when they indulged in gossip & idle talk. It was these stars for whom my classmates - for example: Arts Club Ashraf, future MLA Shukkoor, Municipal Chairman Kalyan, used to influence me in having a celebrity invited to our school/ college functions.

Sometimes visiting journalists and key technicians (cinematographer, dance master, assistant director, etc.) would also be in this large group who sat in rings of chairs outside the shooting floor .... and they would be laughing out loud at stories and jokes. Whenever the talk became bawdy, some responsible individual around (it was **definitely not** one among the stars) would ask us children to leave. I remember Bobachan once shooing us kids away, when amidst hoots, whistles and giggles erotic lines in a song by lyricist Vayalar Ramavarma came up for discussion. My parents too didn't approve of our hanging around when cast & crew were discussing or sat playing cards. In fact, my mother was very very observant of what transpired between myself/ my brother and the boys of our age - brothers, kids of the actors or even child performers - newfound friends we came across at the studio.

When I was in 3rd standard at 7 years age, I was made to act in film **Aisha** (1964) as Nazeer & Sheela's son. There was a song in that film based on the Arabian Nights story of 'Badr-UI-Munir'. There was a thick big book - a translation of the story in malayalam language, kept along with the shooting still albums in the studio library. When I picked it up, Nazeer Sar commented that it was a very good story. As a muslim, he would have been familiar with the story. I didn't read well at that young age. But, 3 years hence, I was there acting in film **Mainatharuvi Kolakkess** (1967) again as Sheelamma's son (my dad in that was Mr. Dominic Alumood - the first occultist seen in film My Dear Kuttichathan).

Now having started reading malayalam stories on my own, I picked up the old book 'Badr-UI-Munir'. My Ammachi immediately pounced on it to check whether the literary content met her moral standards.

"Nazeer Sar said it is good" I protested.

"Maybe for him, it is ..... let me see whether it is good for you" said my mother.

### **Tough Act on the shooting sets.**

In a true sense, the 'moral policing' of mine on the shooting floors started at age 20 (even before Fazil & Siby coming into the scene as detailed earlier). Film *Thacholi Ambu* (1978), the first film on which I got some creative control. Jayan and Ravikumar - two thieves thick in their sinful liaisons, would be joking always amidst the film shoot. Myself as a much younger brother would be smiling away indulgently ... except when the shot was of a serious nature and required emotions unsullied by smalltalk. On Assistant Director Mr. Stanley Jos's meaningful look at me, I would say ".. mathi .. mathi, thamasha nirthu". And as professionals, they would comply.

One of my grouses with the earlier Assistant Director Mr. Raghu was that despite his ardor to complete the scheduled call-sheet in time, he used to participate in loose talk ... sexual jokes too,

to ease the tension on the sets. It reminds me of a scene in 'Detroit novel' written by Alex Haley ... on the car assembly-line, the supervisor would allow the workmen to make indulge in sexual jokes - a concession for the monotony the all-male workforce had to endure all-day long. The problem comes up when *racially sensitive* talk happen ... the colored men didn't like that!

Jayan knew that it was myself who was responsible in casting him in a 'dual-sacrificial-role' in film Thacholi Ambu. His roles along with the offbeat casting of Balan K. Nair turned out to be greater surprises in this hit film than the technological landmark of "Cinemascope" or the casting coup of "*Sivaji Ganeshan as Othenan*". Jayan was grateful to me for that.

It also happened that the conversation would sometimes take a sexual bend ... sometimes about the female performers in the set. I would be at loss how to respond to these talks which as a child I was taught as 'wrong' ... but then, I did participate in such talks during my school & college days with friends. There was a difference now. My school & college were not co-ed. Here I am now in the proximity of female colleagues (performers, though) who are *not very different* from my mother, aunts or sisters (in fact; most of my cousins were girls). And, here it was also evident to me such a conversation was detrimental to the work atmosphere. It evoked some primal instincts which my parents & teachers had taught us to suppress.

The status of mimicry at that time. You mentioned Navodaya sought out new talents from the field of mimicry. Was mimicry a new popular art at that time. I wish to know why mimicry

Not just mimicry

Siby Malayil had a Malayalam Literature background.

Fazil was from Stage ... he incidentally was one of the first who popularised mimicry as a respectable profession, like the standup comedy in the US.

Sheker was from Karayavattom, Journalism

Mathew Paul (the late) was Bsc. and then a Kalamandalam Chenda Vidvan

Rajeev, BCom, was from mimicry

Raghunath Paleri an accomplished novelist

Zainuddin (the late) from mimicry was called in as AD. He became an actor later.

Siby Yogya - a relative - was plain graduate called as AD

Paulson, a church choir leader at Alleppey, as AD

Priyan - English literature, came with recommendations from Mohanlal.

Mimicry, like Kadhprasangam before it, had just gained acceptance in the late 70s at School and College Youth Festivals of Kerala.

When you said it wasn't watching films but the reading habit that helped your knowledge on films. I would like to know more about what kind of literature you read.

Recalling that should be gratifying. Indulgence. Needs some careful enumeration, let me jog my memory and list em ...

Primarily, everything that was available at Bobachan's vast library at small-town Alleppey, and then what could be bought at the PaiCo bookstores at Broadway Kochi.

Archived Reader's Digests, Time/Look/Life/Newsweek/Discover ... Of course, The National Geographic - hundreds of them brought at Moore Market, Madras .... some American Cinematographer issues..

Thousands of Gold Key and Marvel comics. Oh, Bundles of MAD Magazines, Treasure Chests (American children's Mag), Even a bundle of Curlee Wee - South African Magazine banned in India due to Apartheid (but brought by a Kenyan repartee teacher, I think)

Also almost all celebrated contemporary and classic novels.

Michener, Gore Vidal, Irving Stone, ~~Bronte Sisters~~, ~~Thackeray~~, Conan Doyle, Christie, ~~Rice-Boroughs~~, Hmmm ... Margaret Mitchell & ~~Mary Shelly~~ - **All** their works! (ahem, both of them wrote only one each. Those ones are enough. why more?).

Ah, also ~~Ms. George Elliot~~. .... Dickens, Verne.

~~Wodehouse~~ (Priyadarsan narratives), ~~Mark Twain~~, O Henry, Hardley Chase, Alistar MacLean, ~~Pasternack~~, ~~P.S. Buck~~, ~~Tolstoy~~, ~~Chekov~~ ... (at USIS Library and British Council, Trivandrum during Pre-Degree years)

Later ... BIOGRAPHIES - Gandhi, Darwin, Herod, Lincoln, Newton, Kepler, Eastman, Tesla, ~~Ada Byron~~, Turing, Edison, Diesel, Napoleon, Churchill, Duce, Fuhrer ....

EXPEDITIONS - To both the Poles, Shackleton, Marco Polo, Zeng He, Tibetan, Nile, North West Passge, Cortez, Cook, Kon-Tiki, Ra, Genome, Internal combustion Engine, Algorithms, Computers, Space, Lunar landings .... This topic is of course on-going.

BATTLES - Hannibal Rome, Waterloo, Trafalgar, Tsushima, Pearl Harbour, Guadalcanal, ...

WARS - 1st WW, 2nd WW, Crimean, Zulu, Karnatic, ... this too seems to be on-going, sadly.

HISTORY - American, GB, Roman, Byzantine, Renaissance, Latin American, Ancient Egypt, Sumerian, Mesopotamian, ~~Babylonian~~, ~~Persian~~, Kerala kingdoms, ~~Tamil Empires~~. Of course ... other Empires and kingdoms of India, East India company, British conquest of India. World Culinary history, of Music, of Chronograph, Aviation.

REVOLUTIONS - French, Russian, Industrial, Steam, Turbines, Rotary Engine ...

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I believe the reader must have fallen asleep by now.

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I have to confess that a large part of the classic literature I have read are either abridged or Classics Illustrated (a graphic series) - which, in afterthought, are ~~struck through~~, above.

Also, I have to admit that many history narratives I have read are encyclopaedic... or retold by commentators such as Huxley. I never got to read the original historians (divergent P.O.V.s) as I have done in (Biblical) Archaeology and Near-Eastern History, because there was no need to whet the sources associated with the factual verification of a film research.

From 1985, the brilliant K. Sheker was my guide on non-literature readings.

Zacharia - reputed writer and a discerning critic, corrected my perspective on historical narratives.

Architecture and Design - Jayachandran (Chitranjali Studio, Info Park) and again K. Sheker have had influenced me.

Siby Malayil and later B.R. Prasad and Josy Joseph advised me on Malayalam Literature.

I have stopped reading fiction for about a decade now. So frankly, missed out on Gabriel Marques, and the later

Also seeing fiction films has become almost non-existent. Many young filmmakers are scandalized when I say that.

[your knowledge on films.](#)

Largely self taught.

[I had read the write-up on sexuality and morality.](#)

*Ente ponnu kunjey, nerathe parayandey! Vere enthokke vayichennu koodi paranjal, enikku soukaryamaayene ....*

[I remember that I was impressed by the ethical stand you took](#)

Please, offer no accolades for my moral high ground. It had to do with my upbringing - something upon which one has no control ... and also a constant feeling that somebody was watching me from above.

[Daisy Irani saying how she disliked her acting career as a child. She was complaining](#)

Is there a child performer story any different? Culkin, Shirley, MJ, .... Shobha (horrors!) ... Sumathi (heartbreaking)

You haven't heard of Travancore sisters and Sukumari 6 decades ago, I am sure. Or what Puraichi Thalaivi said about her lost childhood. One of the burdens the child of a failed actor has to shoulder.

[how I would address the off-screen narratives that are not so innocent ... I make a distinction between actual children and the idea of childhood.](#)

I am not convinced of that explanation, Anupama. Ultimately it would depend on what you are aiming with your thesis. Better childhood for all children, or better childhood for child performers?

To me, there seems not much difference between a child and an adult. Adults are just children got older. So, in a strict wider sense, for a better world, it has to be ... better parenthood.

Well, I am not sure about that either ...

So I shall wait till I read your book and pray Anupama's **\*masterpiece to change the world!** (When we were of your age, all of us around me aimed \*that high ... and, have reached where we are today. My Ammachi use to tell "*Ambili maamane pidickaana chaadiyaaley, maaveley maanga engilum parickaana pattu*". Not very inspiring, I have to admit)

[I make a distinction between actual children and](#)

One distinction you make - by virtue of your thesis subject, I am sure, is that between a celeb-childhood and a non-celeb-childhood. Another distinction, I suppose, is whether the victim would have a grouse or not. Only here would come the relevance of any 'child-exploitation'. For the film *Makdee* ... the child actor on becoming an adult and is arrested for immoral trafficking, it does not amount to 'celeb-child-exploitation' since the actor didn't voice such a complaint and owned it up as personal decision - as many accused (non-celeb adults) do. Yet, we know where the fault lines are.

Also, we are not sure where to offer more sympathy ... to the victims of Spector/MJ/Lohan/Suman/Bieber/Ghislaine/DeLeon's criminal conducts, or to the above who themselves were victims of troubled celebrity-child-upbringing.

Jijo