

Destination Promotion through Malayalam Cinema: A Study on the Idukki District of Kerala

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Abstract: *This study focuses on the portrayal of Idukki district of Kerala in recent Malayalam films and its role in the promotion of tourism in the region. It aims at finding a relation between previous movies where the district is undisclosed to the audiences and the lately released ones where the possibility of the location is used to its maximum extent that has led to a booming tourism industry in Idukki district. Films having acquired a greater role in today's social life also tend to have a tremendous influence among the people in even choosing the preferred destinations for their leisurely visits. It has become a growing trend among tourists to visit places which are being used as filming locations. This has immensely helped in the exponential increase of tourism growth in those places and a notable influence on the livelihood of the people residing in those areas. This research study focuses on the visual portrayal of Idukki district in selected Malayalam films and the resultant tourism growth in the region as well as its benefits in the area of destination branding.*

Keywords: *Idukki district, Tourism, Promotion, Malayalam films, Destination branding.*

1. Introduction

The cinema in India including all the diverse film industries both regional and national such as Bollywood is heavily dependent on the location of the filming. This is due to the fact that Indian cinema particularly Bollywood and also the regional industries are mostly commercial ventures that operates in a wide array of genres from musicals being the most prominent to romance, comedy etc. In this the location plays a crucial role for the success of the movie as this is evident in almost all successful movies released so far. Cinema in its infancy was mostly confined to the studio interiors around the world and also in India. The restriction of filming in black and white was one of the common factors as cinema being still in development during that time. The emergence of colour film stock opened a vista of new possibilities in filmmaking that is the use of the location as a crucial element in the narrative. India too reflected this new possibility to a highly

successful attempt that continues till today. This is mostly evident in the use of iconic cityscapes of Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi etc. and the exotic hill stations around India such as Kashmir, Darjeeling, and Shimla, as well as the rich forest reserves of both northern and southern India. In south Indian cinema mainly Tamil and Malayalam film industries this use of location is most prominent as most of them are musicals where the carefully choreographed music and dance sequences blend in with the setting used. Since the focus of this research is about the use of location in movies and its impact on the tourism sector, the Malayalam film industry is chosen because of a recent surge in the use of exotic locations in and around Kerala by filmmakers as a vital element in the narrative of the film. Malayalam cinema of the seventies and eighties also used the setting or the location as a key element in the process of storytelling. Wayanad become the first district to be actually promoted through Malayalam films as it was depicted in many popular movies of the time such as Ramu Kariat's *Nellu* (1974) to the latest being in Pazhassiraja (2009). The trend recently seen is in the use of various districts of Kerala as a major element and thematic background to the story. In films like *Ustad Hotel* (2012) the district of Calicut is depicted as well as its culture, cuisine and the slang is accurately shown in the movie which have actually promoted the tourism sector of the district by providing a new outlook about the district in the minds of the people of Kerala. Kochi the upcoming metropolitan city of Kerala has also numerous examples of its promotion through films. Particularly evident in the films such as *Chotta Mumbai* (2007), *Da Thadiya* (2012) etc. has created a new image of the lifestyle and culture of Kochi across Kerala. But the real focus of this research is narrowed to the Idukki district in Kerala and its association with Malayalam cinema throughout due to the fact that it has been the most popularised district in Kerala through the medium of cinema. Due to the vast potential of movies as a source of tourism promotion the Government of Kerala launched a campaign to collaborate with the film industry for developing tourism among the districts (Zeenews, 2015).

Idukki is the second largest district in Kerala having the largest reserve forest area than living space and also has the least population density. The name Idukki is derived from the Malayalam word 'Idukku' which means narrow mountain groves. The people of Idukki are migrated from the nearby districts of Kottayam, Pala and Tamil Nadu and are a mixture of these three cultures. Asia's biggest arch dam is located here intended for electricity generation and the place is well-known for the gardening of spices. The district unbind in three parts mainly the high range, middle range and low range areas connecting the low lying areas with the high ranges through the iconic Neriambangalam Bridge which is also referred to as 'The Gateway to the High ranges'. On the grounds that Idukki is rich of climatic variations and embraced in natural beauty with numerous picturesque locations more than any other district in the state. This includes Munnar which was initially a summer resort for the British in South India, Vagamon, Ramakkalmedu both scenic hill stations as well as numerous wildlife sanctuaries such as the Periyar Tiger Reserve, Eravikulam Wildlife Sanctuary etc. comprising a huge wealth of flora and fauna distributed throughout.

Vaisali (1988) is the first well-known movie which portrayed the district in its most vivid and lavish setting as a result of the ingenious collaboration between filmmaker Bharathan and cinematographer Madhu Ambat. It was a huge hit in the box office and was well appreciated winning several accolades for Madhu Ambat for his photography and for Bharathan for his visionary direction employed in the film. In 2012 the movie *Ordinary* was a layout of the people and culture of Idukki. It portrayed the life in Gavi, a reserved forest area which was the setting of the film. The movie was immediately popular among the masses for its depiction of the place which was new to the audiences of Kerala. As a result of it, the spot witnessed a surge in the number of visitors and has tremendously helped in the growth of tourism in the area (MystikalIndia, 2012). It was also listed in Alistair International, a major tourism provider as one of the leading eco-tourism centers and one of the must see places in India. The following year Drisyam (2013) and Idukki Gold (2013) two of highly successful movies had come up with more depth in the subject and in the portrayal of the socio cultural characteristics of the region. In 2014 the movie *Iyyobinte Pusthakam* based on a story set in British India was also successful and used Idukki as its setting. *Life of Josutty* (2015) and *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016) are the other two movies that were big commercial successes and utilised the district of Idukki as a setting and its various socio cultural elements into the narrative.

This has led to a steady growth in the amount of visitors arriving in Idukki thereby providing a major boost to the tourism undertakings in the district. Apart from all other movies that portray other districts in Kerala it is Idukki that is the most sought over attaining a special status and reception across the audiences in Kerala as this is most evident in the box office collections of films shot in and around Idukki so far. Although many films were made with Idukki as backdrop it was only through newly released movies after 2010 often called the new generation films that has made the district famous amidst the population of Kerala. The life and traditions of the people of Idukki as well as the various scenic locales and wildlife sanctuaries have made it into the movies that they have become an essential part of the story. Apart from all this the natural beauty and the unique traditional background of the region which is unlike almost all locations around Kerala is undecidedly the most important feature for its influence and favour among filmmakers as the rich and lavish landscapes have inspired many filmmakers and writers to utilise the vast potential of the location for the sole purpose of storytelling.

2. Literature Review

There have been many studies done in the area of tourism and travel research. (Soliman, 2011) Exploring the role of film in promoting domestic tourism: A case study of Al Fayoum, Egypt tries to determine the effect of film on the perceived image of domestic destinations portrayed through films. It differs from other similar studies done on the subject so far as it fills the gap in the deficiency of studies on the issue of film induced tourism in the Middle East region. The methodology used in this study was through assessing the perception of a tourist destination before and after watching a film featuring this destination and through the use of questionnaires. The major findings of this research are that films could positively affect audiences' perceptions of domestic destinations in varied ways.

(Hudson, 2006) *Promoting Destinations via Film Tourism: An Empirical Identification of Supporting Marketing Initiatives*. It identifies a model for utilizing the marketing possibilities of film tourism and identifies the optimum marketing factors that encourage film tourists to visit destinations that are depicted in the movie. The major findings of this research is that it identifies four types of marketing activities that can actually benefit the preferred destinations which are practical efforts to encourage producers and studios to film at the location, efforts to generate media

publicity around the film and its location, marketing undertakings that promote the film location after production, and peripheral marketing activities that influence film tourism potential.

(Nikolaos Vagionis, 2011) *Movies as a tool of Modern Tourist Marketing*. This paper published in *Tourismos* an international multidisciplinary journal of Tourism states that movies can be effective marketing tools for the promotion of tourist destinations. The major area of this research is in film induced tourism and how it helped in the marketing and promotion of a destination. One of the major findings of this paper is that there exists a relationship between cinema and tourism because of the common characteristic of both the industries being a means of escape. It also declares that people choose their tourist destinations with what they saw in audio visual platforms like cinema and television. This can voluntary or involuntary have an influence on the people. Another finding is that there is a link between tourism in destinations and its placements in the movie. The methodology used in this research is that of content analysis of existing literature on the topic. It cites the work of eminent researchers who have done work on the subject and concludes that film tourism has several economic advantages from other forms of tourism. This includes that film tourism has duration in time and can bring visitors even when after the movie has done screening. Another one is that it minimises the problem of seasonal tourism by because film locations are not dependent on seasons and are widely available throughout the year.

(Modiano, 2013) *Film Tourism and Travel Motivation*. This article published in the leading travel website *Toposophy.com* tries to elaborate the role played by the movies in attracting tourists towards a particular tourist destination. It further states that movies are encouraging tourism by promoting the locations shown in them. This has led to a steady increase in the number of visitors arriving at the destinations. The article justifies its statement by referring to a global benchmark survey TRAVELSAT Competitive Index which declared its findings that around 40 million of international tourists chose their destination mostly because they saw a film shot in that country. The survey even reports that the regions and cities can widely benefit from this sudden influx in tourism. Another latest example that the article describes is that of destination marketing in India where the government launched a tourism campaign aiming to take advantage of the exotic locales of Pondicherry and Munnar located in the districts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala known for their portrayal in the movie 'Life of Pi' which was an international

success. 'The Land of Pi' campaign that was widespread in India and the world was utilised to promote the tourism in the destinations of Munnar and Pondicherry through various mass media. One of the major findings listed in this article is that there exists a strong relationship between films and tourism and this has led to a surge in the amount of visitors in areas where a film has been shot.

(Das, 2014) *Influence of Indian Cinema in the Travel and Tourism Industry in India*. This article published in the website *TourMyIndia.com* tries to analyse the influence of cinema in the travel and tourism sector in India. This article tries to present its statement from a plethora of examples of numerous films all of which have been shot in favoured destinations. The major finding is that Indian cinema being a massive profit generating industry has done a lot in advancing the tourism in the country as well as showcasing previously unexplored locations to the people. Several prominent Bollywood flicks that featured the use of exotic locations are discussed in the article in detail as well as its hand in promoting the unique features of a particular destination. In case of the Malayalam film industry the article describes about the various movies that were shot in favoured locations around Kerala which were highly popular amongst the viewers. The iconic landmarks of Kerala such as the backwaters and green scenic beauty has made its way into movies made both in Kerala and from around the country. This has helped mainly in the promotion of these locations as is evident in the steady increase in the amount of visitors arriving at locations in and around Kerala where a successful movie was shot.

(Modiano D. , 2012) *Film Tourism & Destination Marketing*. This article published in the travel website *Toposophy.com* focuses on the association between film tourism and destination marketing. It identifies that this type of tourism which is initiated by films called film induced tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the entire tourism industry. This article has narrowed its focus to the United Kingdom and its booming tourism business that was as a result of the movies. The James Bond series of movie which is mostly related to Britain and its immense popularity worldwide was utilised by the tourism sector of the country. This included a widespread tourism campaign throughout the Europe and Americas called Visit Britain which was centered on the James Bond movies to market the destinations shown in the movie. For this an elaborate scheme of advertising is used such as through billboards and in cinemas district to all the inbound markets across the world such as Germany, Australia, US, Brazil etc. This campaign was also extended into

the current digital and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter etc. to promote the thriving tourism economy in the region. The article also mentions about a study that is, an average 120 million people worldwide will see a film in the first three weeks of its opening and that filming locations is becoming more favoured among overseas visitors. The research study about the success of Visit Britain campaign is also features in the article which shows that half of the potential visitors arriving in Britain want to visit the places that were featured in the movie. Finally the article concludes about how this can influence the tourists from India visiting overseas locations. Due to the popularity of Bollywood films many of which have been shot in exotic locations overseas Switzerland and other countries are using this to promote the tourism in their destination.

3. Methodology

The methodology utilised for this study is through content analysis of popular movies released across various time periods in Kerala. Three movies were specifically selected for the study and these are Idukki Gold (2013), Life of Josutty (2015) and Maheshinte Prathikaram (2016) which faithfully portrays the true life and nature of Idukki. Apart from analysing these movies, other films set in the district are also studied to determine the change in the use of location to tell a story through the medium of cinema. In order to develop a sound theoretical frame work for this research a review of literature was undertaken from numerous journals as well as travel website articles. It revealed that not much work has been done in the field of portrayal of film tourism in Kerala so for that this study tried to include the important parameters taken up by foreign and Indian researches on the subject. All these papers dealt with the same content and provided support for this study. To determine the impact of these movies in the tourism of the region an analysis is also performed in the tourism records of the district to find the increase in the number of visitors coming to district.

4. Analysis

Three movies were selected for analysis to determine how they portrayal the district of Idukki, its diverse landscapes and the various sociocultural aspects as well. These are Idukki Gold (2013), Life of Josutty (2015) and Maheshinte Prathikaram (2016). These three movies have utilised Idukki district as a setting for their story and their commercial success meant the people of Kerala who were largely unaware of the district got a new

outlook regarding the geographical and the sociocultural aspect of the district which has actually the boosted the amount of visitors arriving annually.

Maheshinte Prathikaram (2016) is a comedy drama film directed by Dileesh Pothan which was also his directorial debut. Released in Kerala on 5 February 2016, it was a critical and commercially successful movie and grossed an average of 173 million at the box office (James, 2016). It was the core movie which is used for this analysis due to the fact that it remained faithful in its depiction of the sociocultural aspects of life in the district rather than its varied natural locales. The movie begins with a song as the titles appear on screen which is an actual description of the many unheard yet equally attractive places around Idukki. The places such as Kuyilmala, Kiliyar, Kuthirakallangadi, Udhayagiri, Painav, Kallar, Munnar, Paambadumpara, Udubanchola and Kootar are verbally described in the song along with visuals of the life and travails of the ordinary people of Idukki. Kattapana a municipality and the major urban center of the district is the main setting of the film. The culture of the people residing in those areas as well as their slang of language is accurately portrayed in the movie. The cinematography by Shyju Khalid has lent realistic and rich images of the land to the movie.

Life of Josutty (2015) is a drama film directed by Jeethu Joseph which uses Idukki as the setting. Shot mainly in and around Kattapana and Vallakkadavu the movie succeeds in faithfully depicting the traditions and culture of the people residing in the area as well as the natural settings. Computer Generated Imagery was also utilised throughout the movie to enhance the visuals of the diverse landscapes of the district. The hanging bridge of Ayyapankovil now a picturesque tourist attraction is also portrayed extensively in the movie. The final movie used in this analysis is Idukki Gold (2013) directed by Ashiq Abu and shot mainly in and around Idukki. The title also derives the name of the district which has actually worked as a promotional factor for the district. In terms of the visual appeal achieved through exceptional cinematography, Idukki Gold is by far the best movie that captured the geographical beauty of the district and also featured many locations that were previously unaware among the audiences. One of these settings is a cave commonly called the 'Vaishali Cave' which got its name from another movie of the name 'Vaishali' which was shot in and around this cave in the 1980s. Also the famous arch dam of Idukki which is Asia's largest is also shown in the movie. In an alternative way this movie indeed tries to promote a marijuana strain called 'Idukki Gold' which was extremely popular

in the 1980s around the world and which made the district famous in a rather unconventional way. While analyzing previous movies that used Idukki as the setting it is shown that the landscapes of the district are portrayed without disclosing the fact that it was shot there. In Vaishali (1988) the mountainous terrain and the forests were used as the setting for the story that takes place in an ancient era. It was also shot around a cave formed out of a wedge between two rocks that became eventually known as Vaishali Cave and is now prominent tourist destination. This cave is also shown in the movie Idukki Gold (2013). And also due to its diverse natural landscapes the district has also been portrayed extensively across a whole lot of movies although anonymously.

5. Conclusion

The influence of movies among the viewers in even choosing the destinations for their vacations is amply clear from the amount of studies being conducted in this field, some of which were reviewed for this paper. In the case of the district of Idukki in Kerala, its portrayal in recent Malayalam films has led to a booming tourism industry in the region attracting more visitors from across the country every year. This trend of promoting destinations via movies made its way into Malayalam cinema mainly through the movies that were released recently. The new wave of films experimented with making the location as a crucial thematic element of the narrative thereby promoting these destinations. In Ustad Hotel (2012) the many diverse sociocultural aspects as well as exquisite cuisine of the district of Calicut is portrayed so well in the movie that it had created a new image of the districts amongst the viewers of Kerala. And in many similar movies the setting is shown extensively apart from the story that tends to be as if the movies are promoting the destinations which they are shot. Idukki district has attained a special status among tourism destination marketing as it is the most sought over location for filming. This is mostly due to its rich diversity of landscapes and its unique sociocultural aspect which is a slight mix of the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu and from the early immigration of people from the nearby districts. Previously there were a lot of movies that were shot in and around the district but failed to actually stir a sense of awareness regarding the destination. And it was only through the new movies particularly those released in Malayalam after 2010 that actually began promoting the destinations that they were shot. The three movies such as Maheshinte Prathikaram (2016), Life of Josutty (2015) and

Idukki Gold (2013) created a new image of the district across the viewers of the Kerala. Some locales such as the famous arch dam of Idukki actually witnessed a surge in visitors after the movie Idukki Gold (2013) was released which actually proves the fact that movies can in fact promote destinations.

And all the studies done in the field of Tourism clearly indicates that there exists a strong link between tourism growth in a region and its portrayal in a movie. This way of destination marketing through movies is now a growing trend across the state of Kerala with many new movies showcasing their filming locations. It has led to a new area of collaboration between two entirely different fields to grow and mutually benefit from each other.

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