

SECLUDED WORK SPACES OF FILM INDUSTRY: AN ANALYSIS OF PRECARIETY AMONG MID-LEVEL CREW WORKERS IN MALAYALAM FILM INDUSTRY

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INTRODUCTION:

In terms of adapting society to the screen, the Malayalam film industry (Mollywood) has made a huge mark, as its mainstream movies are deep-rooted in their social spaces and local culture (Jithendran & Aiswarya Lakshmi, 2023). Over the years, Malayalam cinema was able to produce dedicated audiences at both national and international levels due to their intense depictions of the social issues and overarching complex cultural patterns such as power hierarchy, hyper-religiosity, systemic exploitation and symbolic violence, etc. (Bhatia & Roji, 2024). This achievement of Mollywood is restricted to the final product that audiences view on the screen, where the same social structure and cultural elements criticised in these movies are visibly dictated in the production processes of these movies (Mini, 2019). In this context, the focus of the current paper is on exploring the issues of workers engaged in the production process of Malayalam movies from a socio-economic perspective.

While analysing the data, it is clear that the film market of Mollywood is very restricted due to its target primary Malayalam-speaking audience being only 2.88 per cent of the national population (Desai, 2021). This directly influences the budget, available screens and gross collection of a Malayalam movie. For context, the all-time most expensive movie produced in India, titled 'Kalki 2898 AD', cost around 600 crore rupees, while the most expensive movie from Mollywood cost around 100 crore rupees (Jangir, 2024; Forbes India, 2024). Additionally, the all-time highest collection of an Indian movie is 2024 crore rupees, set by the movie 'Dangal', whereas the all-time highest-grossing Malayalam movie 'Manjummel Boys' has only collected around 170 crore rupees (Bhatia & Roji, 2024; Govil, 2019). This stark difference shows the limitations of the Malayalam movie industry from a larger economic outlook. The current scenario of expected low profits and return margins is forcing producers to be reluctant to invest large amounts in the production and distribution of Malayalam movies.

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Here, the Malayalam movie Industry is conceptualised as a 'culture industry' producing 'mass cinemas' which will be the goods that are consumed by the audience. Even though Malayalam movies are known for their content quality, which conforms with its use value, the orientation of the producers is toward exchange value which prioritises the relative market performance of the movie (Mini, 2019). This excess stress on the commodification of cultural products is in conflict with the required artistic integrity for the creation of a movie. From a neo-marxiological lens, the intention of maximisation of profit by the people in the top tier is inherently linked with the exploitation of the ones in the periphery (McMahon, 2022). Here, the budget restraints and allocation of limited resources for movie production are essentially translated into constrained and unhealthy workspaces for workers in movie sets. The lack of finance also leads to the hiring of a small pool of workers who have to engage in extra work with limited resources where they undergo significant pressure to finish work as scheduled (Mini, 2019).

Based on this socio-economic landscape of movie production in the Malayalam film industry, this paper narrows it to explore the work culture, issues and challenges of the mid-level workers. This category of workers includes assistant directors, camera operators, production designers and art directors. These workers are vital to the realisation of the intended goal of movies as they manage both the creative and material resource side of the production work. This paper argues that despite the significance of their work in creating a compelling, cohesive and aesthetic visual world, the industry is structured in such a way that it contributes to alienation, creative stagnation and underappreciation of the mid-level crew workers who are employed in the Malayalam movie industry.

OBJECTIVES

- o To understand the basic work challenges of the respondents
- o To analyse how the work of the respondents influences their social identity

HYPOTHESES

- o Workers belonging to the category of production managers are committing to work in multiple movies simultaneously than workers in other categories
- o Pressure faced to acquire other jobs is mostly among the lower income earning mid-level crew workers

METHODS

The study followed a descriptive quantitative research design. The respondents of the study consisted of mid-level crew workers in the Malayalam movie industry who are assistant directors, production managers, art directors and camera operators. The inclusion criteria established for selecting respondents were, 1) should be of age eighteen or more, b) should have only worked in Malayalam movies. The sampling of the respondents was done in a

stratified manner based on the designation. Equal representation was given to each of the designation in respondents selected to balance the responses. In line with this survey method was employed to collect data.

Using the tool, data was collected from 52 respondents. In line with the design, a questionnaire was employed for data collection. For online survey, the questionnaire was shared as Google forms with the participants. All the questions included in the questionnaire were closed-ended. This was to ensure the standardisation of the answers obtained the tool shared with the respondents was consisted of five aspects, 1) social profile of the respondents, 2) economic profile of the respondents, 3) work profile of the respondents, 4) issues of social identity and recognition and 5) challenges faced at the workplace. The tool consisted of 64 questions. The population was divided into subgroups (strata) based on designation. From each stratum, respondents were randomly selected to participate, ensuring that all significant subgroups were proportionally represented in the sample of 52 participants.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Basic profile of the respondents

Basic profiles of the respondents were collected systematically to analyse the reciprocal relationships between work and socio-economic conditions. Sample indicates that designation is equally distributed across four roles. This resulted from the implementation of stratified random sampling, which aimed to give equal representation to four different mid-level crew workers. Males dominate the sample population (92.7 per cent) with a huge margin.

Category	Frequency	Per cent
Average Monthly Income (In Rupees) from Work		
Below 10,000	15	28.8
10,000-25,000	12	23.1
25,000-50,000	17	32.7
Above 50,000	08	15.4
Method of Payment		
Contract	10	19.2
Hourly	02	3.8
Daily	11	21.2
Varies for Movies	29	55.8
Availability of Insurance Coverage for Workplace Accidents		
Yes	14	26.9
No	38	73.1

Effectiveness of Federations in Ensuring Appropriate Remuneration		
Minimal Influence	28	53.9
Moderate Influence	15	28.8
High Influence	09	17.3
Influence of the Income on Improving Quality of Life		
Yes	12	23.1
No	40	76.9
Engagement in Other Part Time Jobs		
Yes	27	51.9
No	25	48.1

(source: Authors)

The data displayed in table 1 indicates that the majority of workers earn between 25,000 and 50,000 rupees per month, with income often varying by project. Most workers are paid on a project basis (55.8 per cent) or daily basis (21.2 per cent), and a significant portion (73.1 per cent) lacks insurance coverage for workplace accidents. Federations have minimal influence on ensuring fair wages, with 53.9 per cent of workers reporting limited impact. A large majority (76.9 per cent) feel that their income does not significantly improve their quality of life, and over half (51.9 per cent) take on part-time jobs to supplement their income. The table shows that the respondents are not earning adequate income to meet their needs, in order to improve their economic situation majority of the respondents are taking other works.

Table 2: Work Profile of the Respondents

Category	Frequency	Per cent
Work-Related Formal Education		
Yes	34	65.4
No	18	34.6
Years Completed in Malayalam Movie Industry		
Below 3 years	08	15.4
3 to 6 years	15	28.8
6 to 9 years	20	38.5
Above 9 years	09	17.3
Number of Movies Worked in		
Below 10	28	53.8
10-20	16	30.8

20-30	04	7.7
Above 30	04	7.7
Strictness of the Work Schedule		
Yes	26	50
No	26	50
Lapse in Availability of Work		
Yes	30	57.7
No	22	42.3
Simultaneous employment in Multiple films		
Yes	24	46.2
No	28	53.8

(source: Authors)

The data from table 2 reveals that 65.4 per cent of individuals have formal work-related education, indicating that the majority are trained for their roles. Most workers have been in the Malayalam movie industry for 6 to 9 years (38.5 per cent), while a smaller portion (17.3 per cent) has over 9 years of experience. Over half (53.8 per cent) have worked in fewer than 10 movies, showing limited project exposure, with only 15.4 per cent having worked on over 20 films. Work schedules are evenly split between strict and flexible, with 50 per cent reporting strict schedules. However, 57.7 per cent experience lapses in work availability, suggesting inconsistent employment. Additionally, 46.2 per cent work on multiple films simultaneously, while the majority (53.8 per cent) focus on one project at a time. This combination of education, experience, and work patterns suggests a somewhat dynamic but unstable work environment with mixed employment practices.

Table 3: Designation and simultaneous commitment to multiple movies

Designation	Simultaneous Commitment to Multiple Movies		Total
	Yes	No	
Assistant Director	3 23.1%	10 76.9%	13 100.0%
Camera Operator	5 38.5%	8 61.5%	13 100%
Art Director	6 46.2%	7 53.8%	13 100.0%

Production Manager	10 76.9%	3 23.1%	13 100.0%
Total	24 46.2%	28 53.8%	52 100.0%
Pearson Chi- square value- 8.048			Level of significance- .045

(source: Authors)

Table 3 analyses whether there is a significant relationship between designation and simultaneous commitment to multiple film works. Hypothesis H1 states that "Workers belong to the category of Production Managers committing to work in multiple movies simultaneously than workers in other categories". 76.9 per cent of the respondents belong to the category of production managers committed to multiple films simultaneously. While 46.2 per cent of the respondents belong to the category of art directors who commit to multiple films simultaneously, 38.5 per cent of the respondents belong to the category of camera operators who commit for multiple films simultaneously. 76.9 per cent of respondents in the category of assistant directors work only for a specific movie at a time. The chi-square test was applied, and the chi-square value is 8.048, and the level of significance is .045. Hence, it is clear that $P < 0.05$. Thus, the hypothesis that "Workers belonging to the category of production managers are committing to work in multiple movies simultaneously than workers in other categories" is proved.

In terms of work nature, the presence of assistant directors and cameraman are essential at the spot of shooting when committed to a movie. While it is not that essential for art directors and production managers to be physically present at the set. This causes assistant directors and cameramen to engage in single movie work at a specific point of time.

Mid-level crew workers and social identity

Humans, as social beings, wish for acceptance in society. Thus, the mid-level crew workers in movies also try to acquire this acceptance through their work and establish the uniqueness of their identity. This section focuses on family support and recognition by work.

Table 4: Influence of Work-related Issues on Social Identity

Category	Frequency	Percent
Experience with Movie Credit Exclusion		
Yes	40	76.9
No	12	23.1
Work Credit lose to Others		
Yes	26	50
No	26	50
Pressure to Acquire other job		
Yes	26	50
No	26	50

(source: Authors)

The issue of credit exclusion is prevalent, with 76.9 per cent of workers experiencing exclusion from movie credits. This reflects a broader concern about professional recognition. Equally, 50 per cent of workers face challenges related to work credit being attributed to others, and the same percentage reports pressure to acquire additional jobs based on relative status. These dynamics underscore a competitive and sometimes unfair environment where recognition is not guaranteed.

Table 5: Average monthly income and pressure to acquire other jobs

Average Monthly Income	Pressure to Acquire Other Jobs		Total
	Yes	No	
Below Rs. 10,000	12 80.0%	1 20.0%	13 100.0%
Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 25,000	8 66.7%	4 33.3%	13 100.0%
Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 50,000	3 17.6%	14 82.4%	13 100%
Rs. 50,000 and above	3 37.5%	5 62.5%	13 100.0%
Total	26 50%	26 50%	52 100.0%
Pearson Chi- square value- 14.351			Level of significance- .002

(source: Authors)

The analysis of hypothesis 2: "pressure faced to acquire other jobs is mostly among the lower income earning mid-level crew workers", explores the relationship between monthly income and the pressure to acquire additional jobs among workers. The data shows that 82.4 per cent of workers earning below Rs. 10,000 feel pressure to seek other jobs, while 66.7 per cent of those earning Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 25,000 also experience this pressure. However, only 17.6 per cent of workers in the Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 50,000 range and 37.5 per cent of those earning Rs. 50,000 and above** report similar pressure. Overall, 50% per cent of all workers experience this pressure. The Pearson Chi-square value is 14.351, with a significance level of 0.002, showing a statistically significant relationship between income level and job-seeking pressure. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the hypothesis that lower-income workers face greater pressure to acquire other jobs is supported by the data. This indicates that as income remains low, the pressure to seek additional employment for economic subsistence significantly increases.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to understand the work-related issues of mid-level crew workers in the Malayalam film industry, specifically by examining the relationship of work with social role, identity, and economic status. This study set out to examine the profile, social identity, and work-related challenges of mid-level workers in the Malayalam film industry, conceptualised as a part of the gig economy. The findings highlight that these respondents perform in a highly precarious environment, marked by economic instability and social exclusion.

The analysis of the workers' basic profiles shows a predominantly male, young, and unmarried workforce who are ready to work and forced to work under poor job situations. Even when most of the respondents have a graduate level of education and are formally educated in movie-related streams, their roles in the industry remain unstable and low paying. This places them squarely within the precariat, a class characterised by job instability, insufficient income, and the absence of benefits like insurance coverage. For the majority of workers, income is often inconsistent, with over half being paid on a project basis. Many lack insurance coverage for workplace accidents, further compounding their vulnerability. This makes financial insecurity a central theme in the study. It should be noted that most of the respondents (51.9 per cent) only earn below 25,000 per month, even when a noticeable number of respondents are committed to simultaneous engagement in multiple movies and other part-time jobs. This is aligning with the literature, which show that the workers at the periphery are overworked and underpaid (Bennett, 2022; Fisk, 2019; Javits & Luby, 2022). This also reflects Bourdieu's precariat theory, where workers are forced to juggle multiple insecure jobs, reflecting broader instability within the gig economy

Professional recognition is another major issue. Nearly 77 per cent of respondents reported being excluded from receiving movie credits, which has a profound impact on their social identity and professional positions. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps to explain this phenomenon: by excluding workers from credits and misattributing their contributions, the industry subtly coerces them into accepting these conditions as normal. This finding also complements the results in the literature as exclusion for work credit is a recurring theme (Siciliano, 2020; Akinwale, 2024), further this study expands it by addressing the processes of ongoing credit appropriation. This exclusion not only diminishes their status within the industry but also limits their opportunities for career advancement and social mobility. The practice of giving credit to others for the work done by workers in positions of no power is also found in the analysis. Half of the respondents have experienced loss of credit to someone else for the work that they have done. This forcefully displaced credit often stems from power imbalances. Consequently, it deepens the recognition gaps for mid-level movie workers, negatively impacting their social identity with respect to their designation. These findings suggest that mid-level crew workers face significant challenges beyond economic insecurity, including power dynamics that affect their ability to secure consistent work. In conclusion, the study highlights the precarious nature of mid-level crew workers in the Malayalam movie industry, reflecting the broader challenges of the gig economy. Their economic instability, lack of professional recognition, and workplace challenges are not isolated problems but part of a larger systemic issue where workers are treated as disposable. Applying Bourdieu's theories emphasises the need for structural reforms that provide more stability, recognition, and protections for these essential yet overlooked contributors to the film industry.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For realising the objectives of the present study, the data regarding socio-economic conditions work conditions, role identity and major challenges faced at the workspace were collected from the respondents. Analysis of the collected data contributed to providing an overarching understanding of the work-related conditions of the respondents. The study was successful in linking work of the individual with their role identity and economic situation. The study highlighted the freelance nature, inconsistent payment and economic instability associated with mid-level crew work in Malayalam film industry. While analysing the social identity of mid-level crew workers with respect to the work credit and recognition, it was found that exclusion of mid-level crew workers from credit lists of movies they have worked in is a prevalent ongoing practice in the Malayalam film industry.

The findings of the study are aligning with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of precarity and major findings in the existing literature. The analysis conducted on the collected data

affirms that the precarity faced by the mid-level crew workers is embedded in the structure of the Malayalam film industry. This is supported by respondents' financial insecurity, scarcity of work and pressure to obtain other jobs for subsistence. The data also point towards undervaluation of the work done by the mid-level crew workers. The exclusion of movie credit list point towards the same. Further there is a need to prevent instances of credit appropriation. Credit attribution, the acknowledgement of the work done is essential for building the professional growth and satisfaction of the workers. The study underscores that the problems faced by the mid-level crew workers are systemic and reflects trends and tendencies of the gig economic structure of the Malayalam film industry.

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