

Forget the actor, it's Mohanlal the producer who should make a comeback; the one behind both his National Awards for Best Actor

Before he began frequently collaborating with Aashirvad Cinemas, Mohanlal personally bankrolled over a dozen films and most of them stand among the finest mainstream Malayalam movies.

Seeing the recent success of *Thudarum*, it's almost impossible not to wonder how the same Mohanlal — who is still capable of delivering spectacular performances, as he demonstrated in the Tharun Moorthy directorial, completely shedding his star mantle and effectively silencing his critics — kept bombarding audiences with atrocities such as *Ittymaani: Made in China* (2019), *Kaappaan* (2019), *Big Brother* (2020), *Marakkar: Arabikadalinte Simham* (2021), *Aaraattu* (2022), *Monster* (2022), *Alone* (2023), and the biggest bomb of all, his directorial debut *Barroz* (2024), one after the other over the past few years.

Although he did offer decent films like *Drishyam 2* (2021), *Neru* (2023), and *Malaikottai Vaaliban* (2024) during the same period, his cinematic dumpster fires far outnumbered the not-bad entries, making one wonder if his involvement in the better projects was merely accidental. In fact, it's hard not to ask: where did the old Mohanlal go?

No, I'm not talking about the actor he once was; probably in his 20s, 30s or even 40s. It's senseless to expect someone in their 60s to perform with the same agility and intensity they had at half their age. But I'm not referring to the actor in him. I'm talking about the producer instead; the Mohanlal who once threw his weight behind exceptional films, sensing the true potential of a story, a project or a director, and turning himself into the creative rock on which a film could be built. What happened to that Mohanlal, the one who could recognise and help realise great films?

Before he began frequently collaborating with Aashirvad Cinemas, a production house established by his driver-turned-confidante-turned-close friend Antony Perumbavoor, Mohanlal, who turns 65 on Wednesday (May 21), had personally bankrolled over a dozen and a half films. In hindsight, many of these projects not only played a key role in elevating his stature as an actor but also stand among the finest mainstream Malayalam films of their era.

Interestingly, Mohanlal entered film production for the first time alongside fellow superstar Mammooty. Together with producer Century Kochumon, director IV Sasi and his wife, actor Seema, they co-founded Casino Films. The company made its debut by bankrolling *Adiyozhukkukal* (1984), written by MT Vasudevan Nair and directed by Sasi himself. A hard-hitting drama, the film earned Mammooty his first Kerala State Film Award for Best Actor. Casino Films didn't stop there, it went on to produce three more acclaimed movies — Sasi and P Padmarajan's *Karimbinpoovinakkare* (1985), and Sathyan Anthikad and Sreenivasan's *Gandhinagar 2nd Street* (1986) and *Nadodikkattu* (1987), before the superstars bid goodbye to the company. Needless to say, all of these titles have been etched into the golden annals of Malayalam cinema and remain cherished classics to this day.

During this period, Mohanlal also became involved with another production house, Cheers, which launched its journey by funding P Anil's *Adiverukal* (1986). Cheers went on to produce Kamal's widely acclaimed tragedy *Unnikale Oru Kadha Parayam* (1987) and the comedy-drama *Orkkappurathu* (1988). The company's final production was *Aryan* (1988), directed by Priyadarshan, which has, over time, drawn significant criticism for its casteist and savarna-centric themes and dialogues.

By then, Mohanlal had not only established himself as one of the finest actors in the industry but had also achieved full-fledged superstardom. Yet, he continued to invest in films that prioritised quality above all else. And soon, he floated his own production company, Pranavam Arts International. Not only did Pranavam Arts change the trajectory of Mohanlal's career, but it also gifted the industry a handful of culturally and aesthetically significant films that defied conventional commercial formulas.

Pranavam's films were not just starkly different from each other in terms of story and aesthetics, but they all explored and highlighted previously unseen facets of Mohanlal's acting abilities, making significant use of his untapped potential. More than that, every film he took on as a producer seemed to possess a soul of its own. It was also as if he chose to produce only those projects that would challenge him as a performer.

Interestingly, four out of the eleven movies he bankrolled under the banner of Pranavam Arts — named after his son Pranav Mohanlal — were penned by the acclaimed screenwriter Lohithadas, renowned for crafting some of the most celebrated dramas in Malayalam cinema, among which was *Kireedam* (1989), directed by Sibi Malayil, which earned Mohanlal a National Film Award – Special Mention.

The Sibi-Lohithadas collaboration continued with *His Highness Abdullah* (1990), which marked Pranavam's debut production. The film followed Abdullah (Mohanlal), a poor Muslim Qawwali singer in Bombay, who is hired by members of an affluent royal Hindu family in Kerala to assassinate their patriarch, Maharaja Udayavarma (Nedumudi Venu). The movie not only showcased Mohanlal's extraordinary ability to perform playback song sequences with near-perfect lip-syncing, but it also broke away from typical mainstream narratives. Unlike many films that either glorify or victimise savarna and Brahminical cultures while portraying Muslim characters in stereotypical roles that are reduced to the binaries of good and bad, *His Highness Abdullah* boldly exposed the rot in elitism, exemplified by a lack of compassion even among blood relatives with each person being more consumed by a greed for dynastic wealth than the other. Featuring some of Malayalam cinema's most iconic songs, such as "Pramadhavanam," "Devasabhathalam," and "Gopika Vasantham," composed by Raveendran and sung by KJ Yesudas and others, the film emerged as a major box office success.

The very next year, the producer-actor returned with another project, once again teaming up with the same writer-director duo. While *His Highness Abdullah* revolved around an impending crime with elements of a thriller too, *Bharatham* (1991) was a pure musical drama, featuring an unrestrained and unmatched Mohanlal at its core. Though films like *Kireedam*, *Thalavattam* (1986), and *Ninnishtam Ennishtam* (1986) had showcased his emotional depth as a performer, the role of Kalloor Gopinathan in *Bharatham* was particularly fresh and complex even for him. Centred on the minor ego clash that erupts between two brothers — Carnatic music virtuosos Gopinathan and his elder sibling Ramanathan (Nedumudi Venu) — following an unforeseen and unfortunate incident, the film gradually evolves into a deeply layered musical family drama with a powerful emotional undercurrent. *Bharatham* further underlined Mohanlal's willingness to shed his star persona, portraying a character rendered helpless by life's cruel twists and misfortunes.

In *Kamaladalam* (1992), another musical drama crafted by the Sibi-Lohithadas duo and produced by Mohanlal, the trio pushed the actor in him into uncharted territory as he portrayed a revered classical dance teacher fighting alcoholism and the ghosts of his past. Though Mohanlal's physical agility was already well-known, primarily through comedic and cinematic dance sequences, this film revealed a completely different dimension of the same. As Nandagopan, Mohanlal delivered a jaw-dropping performance. Once again, he excelled as both producer and actor, proving how a true thespian can use his stature not just to maintain fame but to refine his craft and continually push his artistic boundaries.

Although his next production ventures, Priyadarshan's *Mithunam* (1993) and Sathyan Anthikkad's *Pingami* (1994), failed to succeed at the box office, they remain beloved among film lovers. It was after these that Mohanlal undertook his most ambitious and grandest project yet as a producer,

Priyadarshan's *Kaalapani* (1996). In collaboration with R Mohan's Shogun Films, Pranavam Arts mounted this epic period drama, focusing on the lives of the inmates of the Cellular Jail (*Kaalapani*) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands during the British Raj. As a producer, Mohanlal spared no effort in assembling the best possible cast — including Tabu, Prabhu, Amrith Puri, Sankaradi, Nedumudi Venu, Delhi Ganesh, Sreenivasan and Cochin Haneefa — and crew, which featured stalwarts like Ilaiyaraaja (music), Santosh Sivan (cinematography), Sabu Cyril (art direction), and ST Venky (special effects). Although the film failed to recoup its then-massive production costs, *Kaalapani* became a landmark in Indian cinema and continues to serve as a reference point for period dramas. The movie also earned four National Film Awards.

In 1998, Mohanlal once again joined forces with Lohithadas and created *Kanmadam*, which opened to both critical and commercial acclaim. Various aspects of the film, particularly the performances of Mohanlal and Manju Warrier, received widespread praise. That same year, Pranavam Arts mounted another massive project, *Harikrishnans*, which marked the much-anticipated on-screen reunion of Mohanlal and Mammooty after a decade or so. Featuring Juhi Chawla in the lead, the mystery buddy comedy was directed by Fazil and jointly produced by Mohanlal and his wife, Suchitra. The film lived up to the hype and became a blockbuster, helping Mohanlal recover from the financial setbacks caused by his earlier unsuccessful ventures to an extent. Unfortunately, Pranavam's next project, Bhadran's *Olympian* Anthony Adam (1999), failed to make an impact.

Yet, nothing could dampen Mohanlal's spirit. He once again donned the producer's hat for Shaji N Karun's *Vanaprastham*, one of the most significant films in Malayalam's parallel cinema movement, wherein he played a lowered caste Kathakali artiste grappling with marginalisation from all quarters. An international co-production, the film opened to universal acclaim and even earned Mohanlal and Shaji a place at the Cannes Film Festival, where *Vanaprastham* was selected for the *Un Certain Regard* section. Interestingly, the two films that earned Mohanlal his National Film Awards for Best Actor — *Bharatham* and *Vanaprastham* — were both produced by him. Likewise, two of the six Kerala State Film Awards for Best Actor that he has received were for performances in films he bankrolled — *Kaalapani* and *Vanaprastham* — further underscoring his visionary instincts as a producer.

Even after the establishment of Aashirvad Cinemas, Mohanlal returned to production in 2010, co-producing the military action film *Kandahar*, directed by Major Ravi. This came shortly after he was awarded the honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Territorial Army. Although the film, also featuring Amitabh Bachchan in his Malayalam debut, failed to earn critical acclaim, *Kandahar* served its purpose as Mohanlal's way of expressing gratitude for the honorary military title he had received.

Barring *Kandahar*, nearly every film Mohanlal has produced remains beloved — not only by his fans but by Malayalam cinema lovers in general — largely due to their artistic depth and brilliance. It is precisely this sensibility that had seemed missing from Mohanlal in recent years, as though that part of his creative mind had either become dormant or been deliberately switched off. Now that *Thudarum* is enjoying widespread success, one can only hope the superstar draws upon his earlier producer instincts when choosing his future acting roles.

Anandu Suresh is a Senior sub-editor at Indian Express Online. He specialises in Malayalam cinema, but doesn't limit himself to it and explores various aspects of the art form. He also pens a column titled *Cinema Anatomy*, where he delves extensively into the diverse layers and dimensions of cinema, aiming to uncover deeper meanings and foster continuous discourse. Anandu previously worked with The New Indian Express' news desk in Hyderabad, Telangana. You can follow him on Twitter @anandu_suresh_ and write (or send movie recommendations) to him at anandu.suresh@indianexpress.com. ... Read More