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Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K Suresh

Introduction

In a technologically advanced environment where it is hard to discern reality from fiction, narratives that paint a particular picture about incidents and regions, geopolitical contexts and cultures, and demographics and social structures reveal structural patterns regarding biased worldviews. The coverage of global conflicts and the reporting of protest movements reveal the way media narratives shape the reality of situations differently. For instance, Western media's portrayal of issues in the Middle East has been criticized for their propagandist misrepresentations¹. The reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States, and the 2020-2021 Indian Farmers' Protests are contemporary examples showing how media frames events within preconceived narratives by strategically highlighting or ignoring certain aspects of the story to create an agenda (Bhowmik and Fisher 2023; Carney and Kelekay 2022; Raj and Suresh 2024).

Popular media operates based on sensationalism; the ideology that emphasizes strategies and methods of attention-seeking through which public interest on a certain topic is exploited. To quickly capture the attention of a large audience, popular media often focus on events, issues, and themes that evoke strong emotional responses. Portraying these stories in a highly exaggerated and dramatic fashion can trigger strong emotions of pain, empathy, shame, guilt, fear and aversion where a collective sense of public response is achieved. The tactics of media sensationalism through the sharing of images that highlight human suffering and weakness refer to "poverty porn", a phenomenon familiarized by charity organizations that seek donations and help by "showing exploitative imagery of people living in destitute conditions" (Dortonne 2016). The media sensationalism that feeds on human suffering and its marketability through different modes are based on "viewer guilt" that compels one to "choose between sharing the hurtful images of exploitation or 'turn a blind eye' to what they have seen" (Hamilton, Tokpa, McCain, and Donovan 2021, 2). This genre of poverty porn explicitly narrates Third World tragedies and miseries of marginalized groups in a celebratory manner that suits the very idea of progress for a privileged minority (Lugo-Ocando 2014).

In India, the notion of poverty porn is part of popular culture, where news agencies, social media, political parties, religious organizations, film and television engage in a collective discourse that sensationalizes hardship and progress. This phenomenon often manifests through emotionally stimulating portrayals that highlight vulnerability, creating a spectacle that manipulates audience perceptions. The representation of poverty and adversity is framed in a way that emphasizes resilience, perseverance, or growth but does so through an exaggerated focus on suffering. This tendency to turn hardship into an emotional commodity serves as a tool for marketing, public relations, and political manoeuvring, effectively commodifying poverty for mass consumption.

This chapter analyses the discourse of poverty porn and how media and government use crises as opportunities to construct a unifying emotional narrative. It examines the context of Kerala, the southernmost Indian state which is known for its higher human development index—including high literacy rates, low infant mortality, and an advanced public healthcare system—to understand how progress is often projected as an outcome of dealing with suffering. Kerala is often depicted as a model state in India and the much-celebrated ‘Kerala Model’ of development, which gained recognition in the 1970s, represents Kerala’s attempts to eradicate social and economic inequalities through reforms such as land redistribution, public distribution systems, and cooperative movements (Parayil 1996; Véron 2001). This chapter argues that media and political parties in Kerala often exploit the suffering of ordinary people as a means to emphasize the need for progress. However, these efforts may sometimes obscure more complex systemic issues and undermine genuine attempts at reform by prioritizing individual stories of hardship over addressing structural inequalities.

In the twenty-first century, media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception. Here, popular narratives about social and political issues are substance for media sensationalism, which often dramatizes social issues like political violence, gender-based crimes, and natural disasters, leading to a ‘poverty porn’ perception of the state’s realities. This type of media representation exploits the suffering of marginalized communities for emotional appeal, perpetuating stereotypes and failing to address root causes. The current chapter aims to critically examine the phenomenon of poverty porn in media representation and sensationalism by analyzing the Kerala model as a context. Through an analysis of how media sensationalism shapes and often distorts narratives of poverty, resilience, and progress, the chapter explores the ethical and ideological dimensions of such portrayals. It argues that media outlets, political

groups, and public relations campaigns in Kerala frequently amplify and exploit imagery of hardship, suffering, and social challenges to garner public attention and foster emotional engagement. In doing so, these representations reinforce stereotypes, commodify poverty, and overshadow systemic discussions around development, equity, and social justice. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of how Kerala's image as a model state intersects with poverty porn to project both progress and hardship as a means to influence public opinion. It illustrates how media, through selective representation and sensationalism, often masks the complexities of social issues. Rather than engaging with underlying structural inequalities, the focus is shifted to emotionally charged portrayals that serve political, social, or commercial interests.

Western Media Narratives of Poverty Porn

The western-centric bias in media's influence on communication, culture, society, and human behaviour often mirror the Western, especially American ideas of cultural superiority (McQuail 2000). Media, when controlled by nationalistic or extremist entities, can be weaponized to manipulate public sentiment, fuelling division and conflict rather than fostering unity (Delić 2020). The political conditioning of an era is often used by media discourses to find propagandist methods to frame stories in ways that help set special agendas (Fainberg 2021). Global media often takes part in international affairs with vested interests and creates homogenized narrative space in an increasingly globalized environment. In recent times, social media has become a significant factor in political agenda-setting, with digital platforms empowering various actors, including political parties and individual politicians, to influence public discourse alongside traditional media (Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli, and Müller 2022).

While news media ideally supports democracy by representing diverse conflicts, there is an underlying structural bias in how journalists frame public disputes by unconsciously favouring dominant narratives and reinforcing certain perspectives over others (Fielding 2024). Media framing and source selection can shape perceptions of Otherness, influencing public understanding of global events and regions (Cao 2007; Gabore 2020). For instance, Tariq Amin-Khan (2012) argues that the coverage of issues like the niqab debate, terrorism, and sports by Western media fostered racial stereotypes and the vilification of Muslims in Western societies. The power of such framing lies not only in the stories told but also in those left untold, which often obscures the complexities of cultural and geopolitical contexts. In the case of South Asia, Western media narratives frequently reduce it to a land of poverty or as an exotic space for investment, neglecting its rich history and diverse realities (Bhagavan and Bari 2001). This

biased representation perpetuates a cycle of misunderstanding and reinforces global hierarchies, shaping how entire populations are perceived in a specific way.

Western media²'s refusal to acknowledge India as an emerging power highlights a tendency to prioritize narratives that reinforce the West's dominant power structures. The way both national and international media disseminate narratives defines an explicable power difference between the ones who make the narratives and the ones who are subjects in them. It denotes how the production and reinforcement of narrative images and their interpretations are significant in establishing a particular point of view in society. The construction of "image-worlds" affects the existing structural aspects of society and they contain "the ability to reterritorialize and transcode the sordid conditions of a third-world metropolis" (Basu 2010, 95). Media influences the way a particular image gets associated with a region and becomes its most popular defining signifier. Once such images are transnationally disseminated, they establish a concrete reality and facilitate further identifications of the region through similar images that refer to such a collective reality.

The hegemony of Western media is reflected in representations of foreign issues. The ideology of the Western perspective is often characterized by an urge to stereotype and romanticize Eastern countries and spaces outside the West as the normalized "Other" (Said 1978). Edward Said (1978, 1) argues that "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." The impact of cultural imperialism, global capitalism, and Western modernity have contributed to the new world-making through certain archetypes that refuse to see things from the actual contexts in which an authentic view is possible. The many stereotypes that are sensationalized in news media reporting and broadcasting are reflected in other entertainment platforms as well, especially entertainment media forms such as popular films, reality television, comedy shows, and video games (Ross 2019). Film productions can construct a cultural imperative that asserts a view that forces one to imagine certain places as signifiers of misery and violence (Isea 2018). Critically acclaimed films like *Gandhi* (1982), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *Blood Diamond* (2006), and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) are examples of cinema using "Third World" struggles to create "an extensive repertoire of images about the South which has considerable bearing on how Northern audiences view the South and, arguably, on how Southern elites see their own subalterns" (Sengupta 2010, 601). The portrayal of India in films produced in the West celebrates the idea of an uncivilized, pre-modern,

socially backward, savage, and traditional land, and filmmakers and reporters have frequently subscribed to a Western gaze to create spectacles out of conditions like poverty (Shah 2006; Shome 1996).

Wendy Keys and Barbara Pini (2018, 3) state that poverty porn is “a genre that focuses on entertainment, titillation, and sensationalism, and a de-contextualising of financial deprivation, alongside an associated emphasis on individual failure and personal irresponsibility”. The emergence of poverty porn television has legitimized socio-economic conditions through programming (Beresford 2016; Jensen 2014; Paton and Cooper 2021). The genre of reality television, for instance, has developed the possibility of sensationalizing suffering through new formats suitable to the changed socio-economic structure in a globalized scenario. Anna McCarthy (2007) argues that the ideology of reality television is based on neoliberal values that focus on the individual as an agent with responsibility—referring to it as “neoliberalism’s theatre of suffering”, reality television connects with audiences through responses that evoke a shared sense of suffering (McCarthy 2007, 34). Poverty porn identifies “suffering” as a universal phenomenon that uniformly affects human populations of all cultures and social systems. It uses this commonality to find an opportunity in the most diversified cultures such as India to create an emotional mass market for profit. In other words, poverty porn achieves its goals through the cultural homogenization of suffering.

Poverty porn facilitates the structuring of the “Other” in popular culture. Viewing the Other from a distance defines the Western approach to identifying, defining, and appropriating the Other as a subject of low culture and development. The identification of the Other allows the Western observers to project their gaze onto the unique cultural, geographical, and indigenous coordinates to find the exotic quality that contradicts the Western way of life. For example, the rural population is often imagined as pre-modern savage victims in the dominant popular imaginations of the West (Pini, Mayes, and Rodriguez Castro 2017). The existence of the Oriental and Occidental differences in an unbalanced power equilibrium allows the Westerner to culturally appropriate and control the Orient. Such appropriations use media as a means to regulate the desires in popular culture to orchestrate the agenda of disseminating the ‘Western knowledge of the Eastern world’ as legitimate. This strategy of Westernizing the Orient starts with the construction of the Eastern stereotypical Other as an irrational, feminized, psychologically weak non-European while reiterating the European as a rational, authoritative, and masculine image (Said 1978). Since Otherness is viewed as a form of marginalization and

exclusion (Warf 2010), representing the Other in popular media facilitates the parochial ideology with which a dominant system of signifiers gives meaning to a category of people and their geographies, cultural differences, beliefs, and practices. For instance, in the context of the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, the representation of the “Slumdog” within the Hollywood text attracts the universal gaze into the image of the Other and finds the possibility of a spectacle out of it. The ironic combination of the “Slumdog” and “the millionaire” reveals the rhetoric of Othering as a form of juxtaposing two contradicting categories of identities to achieve an emotive response among those who perceive it. Mary Grace Antony (2012) argues that the film and its marketing endorsed Western interventionist rhetoric by using Orientalist tropes to represent poverty. The way the “Slumdog” represents an India that is poor, non-progressive, and filthy, and the “millionaire” represents a capitalist West that is rich, productive, and successful, shows how a popular cultural medium like cinema sensationalizes the poverty porn culture in favour of Western interests.

Narratives of Empathy in Indian Media: The Politics of Sensationalism

The concoction of behavioural, spontaneous, and dynamic patterns of human interactions and experiences constitutes the cultural media practice of television in India. There is preservation and change of cultural elements under the presence of visual media, and the socialization of the public in this context is influenced by the degree to which mass media interacts with its consumers. The impact of popular genres—family drama soaps and reality shows—has been overtly emotional across regions that are outside the border of India. After Doordarshan, India's public service broadcaster, lost its monopoly over Indian television and its televised representations of Indian culture, a new liberalization of culture emerged. This shift, according to Sinclair and Harrison (2004, 47), “meant, on one hand, access to sources of news and entertainment not controlled by the government but, on the other, exposure to a televisual culture at odds with traditional norms and values,” introducing “cultural invasions” through Westernized programs that sought to “indigenize the global forms of commercial television.” Satellite broadcasting was introduced to South Asia in the early 1990s, coinciding with India's adoption of economic liberalization policies in 1991. This period saw the introduction of private cable and satellite channels, which significantly transformed media landscapes and contributed to the growth of a consumer-oriented public life (Page and Crawley 2001).

The Indian media's construction of poverty porn can be seen as an attempt to frame the unexplored realities of the underprivileged, highlighting the harsh struggles that define their

fight for survival. Indian reality television shows like *Satyamev Jayate* (2012-14) were about “meeting the common man of India, connecting with India and its people” (Rediff) by exploring social problems such as female foeticide, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, the dowry system, casteism, and honour killings. The show’s host, Aamir Khan's emotional involvement, including shedding tears and expressing shock, enhanced the show's intimacy and authenticity (Murray 2005). Poverty porn narratives are often journeys into the private lives of the people who are now exposed to the public through the media lens. Such exposure strips them of their individuality and right to privacy at an unconstitutional level and these so-called “township tours” have the quality of being “social pornography” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 54). The pornographic aspects of exposure and voyeurism are inherent in the spectacles of poverty porn as their political principle is a form of attention-seeking through transgressive visuals. For example, film, television, and news media have a strong impact on the popularization of Dharavi³, especially in shaping a prior understanding of it (Dyson 2012, 266). The sensationalizing effect created by the “Western curiosity and fascination with the slum” is evident in films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) which focuses on marketing the Third World context to a wider transnational audience (Dyson 2012, 255).

In creating a poverty porn rhetoric, victimization is rendered as an effective strategy for framing the Other. Mirjam Vossen (2017) identified victim framing as one of the main strategies of Western media in creating narratives of poverty porn. To project the image of the dispossessed as a symbol of the social, cultural, political, and economic situation of the land, facts and reality are presented with emotion. The overemphasis on emotional reality is central to the ideology of poverty porn, as it assigns value to suffering and portrays those who endure it as subjects deserving of sympathy. The tactic of “aestheticizing poverty” makes us visualize the poor as a failed subject without having to pay much attention to the conditions that produce such inequality (Ibrahim 2017, 2-4).

There has been a popular viewership for shocking images of poverty porn in developing countries. Many disasters and crises are identified by the “uniqueness” of these notorious images. For example, the dead child’s picture from the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy (Tiwari 2021) and Kevin Carter’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph—“The Vulture and the Little Girl”—show the severity of the context more powerfully than any other descriptive format. Media reception of some of the worst disasters that happened in India such as the Bhopal gas tragedy, the 2004 Earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean, and the 2017 Uttarakhand Earthquake

showed the extremity of these events through pictures and videos of victims in agony. Pictures of dead bodies, animals, the wounded in the hospital, and homeless people, were used by international media to narrate the horrifying realities that created victims.

The media's framing of disaster events and tragedies depends on the type of audience they are addressing. The bias in framing is explicit when it comes to reporting home events. The power of mediated images affects the perception of the audience in their meaning-making process. The purpose of these images is to sensationalize an event or a context in favour of the narrator or those who benefit from the ramifications of the narrative. The reporting of the 9/11 attacks for example, showed the horrifying nature of the event with visuals of survivors, fire brigades, and police officials, but it was broadcasted as a means to create a sense of national disaster rather than emphasizing individual suffering. However, when national disasters are portrayed in the West, communities outside the mainstream are presented as subjects in a victimized position. Voorhees et al. (2007) for example, find that when Hurricane Katrina hit the US Gulf Coast in 2005, the affected minority groups were portrayed in the media "in a passive or 'victim' role and are rarely shown in positions of expertise".

Poverty porn is obsessed with the production of disenfranchised subjects that have no significance without the tragedies they are involved in and the miseries they carry to the forefront of society. The "poor" in the poverty rhetoric lack identity and are responsible for a collective Other through which a negative image of the community is created through homogenization and stereotypical explanations (Paterson, Coffey-Glover, and Peplow 2016). In addition to the way it devalues individual identity, one of the main disadvantages of subscribing to the media rhetoric of poverty porn is the negative way it affects the psychological realm of the masses. It encourages the viewer to have a biased point of view against certain people, and poverty porn pictures create a false sense of hope through the invocation of guilt as a natural human emotion. Dortonne (2016) observes that poverty porn makes people feel "uncomfortable, disconnected, and guilty".

The Kerala Model: The Construction and the Popularization of the Victim Image

A small state with a population of about 36 million, Kerala has performed well on the life expectancy, literacy, and infant mortality rate scales of the human development index (Census India 2011). The consistency shown by the state in the fields of health and education is often cited as a highlight of what is known as the 'Kerala Model of Development' (Parayil 1996;

Véron 2001). The Kerala Model has also been moulded by a series of historical and social factors. Inspired by a socialist ideological background that dominates the political narratives of the land, the Kerala Model is intended to address the aspirations and developmental progress of the working-class population. The interactivity between the state and the proletariat is what defines the success of such a model where the government must ideally function as a 'proactive and interventionist state' that ensures 'social mobilization and public participation' (Chathukulam and Tharamangalam 2021). Therefore, it is generally perceived that the government is not only the provider of services and reservations⁴ to the dispossessed, but that it should also act as an inhibitor in situations where inequality intensifies to deny social justice.

Despite the numerous accolades and successes attributed to the Kerala Model of Development, it is not without its criticisms and failures. The model's focus on social development over economic growth led to a sluggish industrial sector, limited job opportunities, and a failure to develop vocational skills, exacerbating unemployment and underemployment (Kannan 2023). The model, designed for a small state with a high population, primarily produced a politically conscious and educated populace without establishing a sustainable pattern of development and progress (Tharamangalam 1998). Kerala's dependence on remittances from the large expatriate workforce in the Gulf countries created economic vulnerability, as these remittances are subject to global market fluctuations (Kannan 2023). The model has also faced criticisms for inadequate infrastructure development and bureaucratic inefficiencies, which hinder further economic progress and sustainable development (Franke and Chasin 1998). Violent trade unionism has also hindered investments and development, deterring potential investors (Tharamangalam 1998). Moreover, corruption, political nepotism, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and religious and caste-based socio-political dynamics have complicated governance and obstructed efficient policy implementation and economic growth (George 1998). Therefore, the Kerala Model has struggled to create a robust and self-sustaining economic framework capable of supporting its social achievements.

Kerala, renowned for its high media literacy and numerous 24/7 news channels, often promotes media sensationalism, particularly during tragedies and crises through reports and stories that highlight the victim image of individuals. The Attappadi Madhu issue is an example of this. Madhu, a tribal man accused of theft, was brutally beaten to death by a mob in 2018. The media widely disseminated photographs of Madhu, portraying him as a tragic symbol of mob violence and caste discrimination (Naha 2023). These images, while raising awareness about the grave

injustice, also victimized him posthumously, reducing his identity to a mere representation of societal issues. The intense media coverage, often sensationalized, focused on the shocking nature of the crime, which, while crucial for highlighting systemic problems, also risked exploiting Madhu's tragedy for viewership, overshadowing deeper discussions on the underlying issues of caste and social inequality (Ragesh 2018).

Similarly, the T. P. Chandrasekharan, Abhimanyu, and Sidhdhardhan murder cases are notable instances of political and social violence in Kerala. T. P. Chandrasekharan, a former political leader in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), was brutally murdered in 2012, highlighting violent political rivalries within the state (Philip 2024). Abhimanyu, a 20-year-old student and a Students' Federation of India (SFI) member, was killed in 2018 at Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, amid political clashes involving student groups (Surya 2024). Sidhdhardhan, a college student, was murdered in 2024, as a result of campus hooliganism by student political groups (Assary 2024). Extensive media coverage of these cases underscored the deep-seated issues of political violence and social inequalities in Kerala, sparking public debate and calls for addressing these systemic problems. In each of these cases, the framing of the victims by the media, garnered widespread public empathy and outrage over the brutality of their deaths. The explicit details of these tragedies, such as the manner of the killings and the identities of the victims, were extensively covered by the media, serving as fodder for political debates and discussions. In all of these cases, the media emphasizes the suffering and victimization of individuals and groups, often portraying them as passive recipients of harm rather than active agents in their own lives. This emphasis on victimhood reduces people to their suffering alone. Such media representations contribute to a narrative where the marginalized are perpetually seen as helpless and in need of rescue.

Media Sensationalism and Poverty Porn during COVID-19 in Kerala

During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, Kerala's media played a crucial role in both disseminating essential information and framing public perception of the pandemic's impact and the government's response. On 30 January 2020, Kerala became the first Indian state to officially report confirmed COVID-19 cases in the country. To disseminate authentic information and reduce the panic response to the unprecedented situation, official statements from authorities like the Chief Minister, health minister, local government officials, doctors, and police officers were broadcast through all media platforms. The experience gained from disaster management during the 2018 Nipah virus outbreak and the 2018 floods—two events

that not only disrupted the state's social, political, and economic stability but also revealed the resilience and strength of the population in the face of catastrophes—also eased the fight against the pandemic. The Kerala model approach received international recognition and applause through media reports that praised its humanitarian and practical approach that provided free and equal treatment to people suffering from the pandemic (Biswas 2020; Kurian 2020; The Economist 2020). Indeed, Soumodip Sarkar (2021) finds that the Kerala State Government used low-cost, effective technologies to guide decision-making and strategy, emphasizing the collaboration between the government, research institutions, and the private sector, which played a key role in mitigating the pandemic crisis.

The media narratives about the pandemic generally suggested that India's diplomatic efforts were weakened due to internal challenges and poor governance (Hasangani 2021). The internal health system of the country crumbled as soon as infections skyrocketed, especially during the second wave, when India one of the worst affected countries in the world. The state's lack of preparation and overconfidence were heavily criticized, along with the government's action of exporting vaccines to foreign countries. During this period, seriously infected patients were to suffer intense respiratory difficulties due to the unavailability of oxygen tanks and insufficient hospital beds. This created a nationwide panic response to the situation, and international representations of India -through media reports, videos, and photographs - disseminated the grave effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the underprivileged. Emergency critical care was not available to everyone, and those who could not go to private hospitals to get treatment had to wait on the streets and surroundings of government hospitals for help. Overcrowded hospitals faced new challenges due to the lack of sufficient beds, medicines, and oxygen supply. The sight of abandoned dead bodies floating on rivers not only shook the Indian public consciousness, they became symbols of inequality.

While early reports showcased Kerala's 'model' response to the pandemic, undercurrents of sensationalism emerged, highlighting the disparities in suffering. Media coverage increasingly spotlighted distressing images of the state's underprivileged struggling with restricted resources, hinting at a deeper portrayal of poverty to captivate audiences. As COVID-19 surged, Kerala media drew public attention to the plight of migrant workers, unemployed residents, and individuals experiencing economic hardship and isolation. Headlines often highlighted the forced return of people from their workplaces to their family homes. This group predominantly included individuals who typically live away from their families due to work,

such as men with temporary jobs, daily wage labourers, interstate migrants, and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) returning from the Gulf region. Such forced movement which pushed them into the confined space of their home resulted in new tensions and disruptions within the household. The structural dynamics of the household changed due to the impact of individuals getting trapped with insufficient economic support, distorted family relationships and mental health problems. The loss of mobility and social isolation gave rise to a gendered domestic space where traditional Indian housewives had to deal with difficulties associated with their returned husbands. The loss of male jobs affected the livelihood of women in the form of occupational crowding, extended domestic work, hunger, and domestic violence (Agarwal 2021). Such reporting, although exposing genuine issues, perpetuated the idea of "poverty porn"—exaggerating the misery of the vulnerable to elicit public sympathy and engagement.

Although COVID-19 was a tragedy for the entire world, its impact on people has been very different. Since the intensity of suffering always varies due to the existing socio-economic status of individuals, what tragedies produce is a state of inequality in suffering. For example, the pandemic has made the gap between blue-collar and white-collar workers more pronounced and visible. While manual laborers in fields like construction, agriculture, and fishing were unable to work, sectors with advanced technology were able to create digital environments, enabling employees to work from their isolated spaces. Public transportation is a mandatory requirement for the working-class population to travel to their work destinations on a daily basis. However, 'work from home' models are less affected by travel restrictions, and the increase in private vehicle usage was observed as a reaction to the decline of public transportation (Vickerman 2021). The changes in public transport affected services provided by truck drivers, taxi drivers, and buses which in effect also affected the populations that depend on them, in turn resulting in a financial crisis leading to the shut-down of such services and the emergence of new situations such as the sudden and unplanned movement of migrant workers to their homelands on foot (Pal et al. 2021; Pandey 2020; The Hindu 2020). Attributes like cleanliness, crowding level, and pedestrian environment are observed as some new areas of concern for transportation (Cheranchery et al. 2021), and travelling in the post-pandemic era adds restrictions to the freedom of movement of people with no private vehicle support.

The media also emphasized digital inequalities, portraying stories of rural students struggling to access online education due to a lack of internet connectivity and digital devices (Cappelle 2021). Parents who had lost their jobs in the pandemic could not provide new mobile phones

for their children. Poor or no internet connection due to the lack of mobile towers in some parts of the state caused issues for students who failed to connect with online classes on time. The emphasis on stark imagery of children climbing trees for internet signals or using makeshift devices to attend online classes further exemplifies how media narratives leaned towards poverty as a spectacle (India Today 2020; Unnithan 2021). To address these issues, there were attempts to donate mobile phones to those in need. However, reports of similar problems continued to emerge over time. Cases of suicide attempts by students were reported as little care was given to the mental health of children. In addition to this, some private schools refused to give fees relaxation, some even prevented those who have not paid the tuition to attend online classes. All such moves had an impact on the psycho-social conditions of the people. Rajesh (2024) finds that stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, stigma, and other psychiatric issues were prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kerala.

Media sensationalism involves amplifying or exaggerating news stories to attract viewers and increase ratings. During the pandemic, Malayalam media platforms gave recognition to the 'freedom' of the middle-classes and their individual acts of creative work; especially through news reports that focused on the idea that people were coping with the pandemic on their own. For the privileged, the pandemic was an opportunity to think about how to spend time in lockdowns. The urge to revisit the past appeared in the form of nostalgia, and engaging in leisure-related activities to deal with isolation was perceived as an effective coping mechanism (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020). The opportunity to revisit past memories provided a sense of connection and comfort, offering a temporary escape from the present uncertainties and challenges. The lack of new entertainment in visual media led to people creating and sharing their own forms of entertainment by making short videos of them singing and dancing. Such similar individual communicative engagements were often conjoined together and disseminated through social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram. This trend was followed by celebrities (film stars, professional singers, and dancers), who created mashup videos of them singing and dancing. Local news channels in Kerala in turn created new programmes of fun discussions involving film stars and artists. All such activities created a mode of virtual participation and exchange between isolated people from different areas of the land connected through technology.

While personal stories and artistic expressions of the pandemic offered entertainment and fulfilment to those able to isolate at home, some parallel events and responses lacked the same

emotional and psychological resonance. For example, people who found lockdowns to be a threat to their very existential survival had to resort to extreme measures. One such context was the increase in the number of suicides due to alcohol withdrawal symptoms (Ahmed, Khaium, and Tazmeem 2020). In addition to this, there were reports of people dying after consuming hand sanitizer and other toxic chemicals in their desperate attempts to deal with withdrawal symptoms (Khadse and Murthy 2021). The rate of alcohol consumption is high in Kerala, partly due to the state's reliance on alcohol sales as a significant revenue source (Panickar 2015).⁵ Little measures have been taken to address issues related to alcoholism and the pandemic forced addicts to find alternative measures to get their daily dose of liquor. When the liquor shops were closed during the lockdown, people started to illegally brew products in secret places, including in their own homes (Mohan 2020), leading to the arrest of individuals and confiscation of materials by the Excise Department of Kerala. Reports say that when people who worked in bars, pubs, and toddy shops⁶ lost their jobs due to the lockdown, they began illicit distilling and bootlegging to find money, and the government's refusal to start a 'home delivery' program only made the situation worse (Anand 2021).

Conspiracy theories and skepticism about the pandemic have further enforced new divides in society. The sudden flow of misinformation and rumours through social media platforms have psychological impacts with increased signs of fear, anxiety and stress appearing in society (Kumar and Nayar 2021), thus triggering new symptoms of propagandist fear-mongering and brainwashing. Many believe that the pandemic was an orchestrated attack on public health systems, and created new narratives to challenge public perceptions of the pandemic's origins and impact, with little to no evidence to support their claims. Religious indoctrination and pseudoscientific claims have also played crucial roles in shifting public opinion on the pandemic, its causes, and possible solutions. People who refused to take vaccines and adopted alternate medical practices like Homeopathy and Ayurveda⁷ as opposed to modern medical treatments put pressure on the government to make changes in their policies. For example, medical practitioners of the AYUSH⁸— the alternative medicine system in India—have complained that they have been discriminated against and criticized by government doctors (Pulla 2020). Similarly, there emerged another situation of a group of anti-vaxxer school teachers refusing to take vaccines due to religious reasons (Unnikrishnan 2021). Such contexts of different opinions generated criticism from both sides of the argument about how the pandemic is perceived individually and collectively.

The arrival of the internet and its influence on communication processes have diminished the differences between reality and virtuality, transforming the contemporary social and cultural landscape into a mode of real virtuality that integrates different forms of real-life interactions to produce a hybridized everydayness (Castells 2010). Baruah and Borborah (2021) argue that the COVID-19 crisis has intensified the significance of individuals' digital identities within the global market, while also deepening societal inequalities. It can be observed that this shift has led to increased surveillance and widened the existing digital divide, further exacerbating social disparities. Aspects of the digital divide, consumer culture, and capitalist hegemonic power have resurfaced through the pandemic situation, which can be argued as digitally motivated and manipulated by users who are often hidden from mainstream discussions.

The Kerala Model pandemic management has been criticized by opposition parties for its strategies which aimed to address problems only to make the government look popular and effective from an outsider's perspective (Chathukulam and Tharamangalam 2021). The government distributed free kits containing essential food items and basic necessities to households, aiming to alleviate immediate hardships during lockdowns (Ilankath and Kadambad 2020). While these kits were intended to provide relief, critics argue that such measures were populist tactics aimed at boosting the government's image rather than addressing long-term social injustices (Sathyan 2021). Measures like free ration are therefore viewed as populist agendas that failed to eradicate social injustices in the long run. The support of public relations agencies and advertisement through mainstream news media channels were also pointed out as communicative strategies that appeal to the popular consensus. The construction and dissemination of mediated narratives were also enhanced by the state's existing digital divide and digital illiteracy. We would argue that this shows that the Kerala Model handled the pandemic situation to the advantage of the powerful class that makes the rules and regulations. Inequalities that emerge in such contexts are not unrecognizable, but they are largely overlooked in the name of collective action.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of poverty porn in media representation shows how media and political stakeholders use crises as opportunities to construct unifying emotional narratives. By analyzing Kerala's unique socio-political context—marked by high human development indicators, such as a robust public healthcare system, high literacy rates, and low infant mortality—this chapter examined how the state's progress is often framed as an outcome of effectively managing suffering. In this sense, the Kerala model of development becomes a complex narrative where both progress and hardship are amplified, often to shape public opinion and reinforce political or social agendas.

Through an in-depth analysis of media sensationalism, this chapter argues that Kerala's portrayal in the media frequently reinforces stereotypes, commodifies poverty, and obscures the underlying systemic challenges tied to social justice and equity. By constructing emotionally charged narratives around poverty and resilience, media outlets, political groups, and PR campaigns risk simplifying complex issues and contributing to a performative empathy from the public, one that often does not translate into meaningful change. This critical view of Kerala's media landscape contributes to the wider discourse on media, inequality, and the ethics of representation, challenging readers to consider how poverty is packaged and consumed in the public sphere.

This chapter connects Kerala's media narratives to broader concerns within media studies, development ethics, and social policy. By dissecting how poverty porn influences public discourse, it underscores the need to move beyond binary frames of progress and suffering and to instead recognize the cyclical, universal dimensions of human hardship. Future research and policy should focus on promoting responsible journalism and media literacy to foster a more informed public that can discern between performative empathy and substantive engagement. Additionally, comparative studies with regions or countries that have successfully mitigated the effects of poverty porn offer potential pathways for Kerala. Addressing these challenges will be essential for developing a balanced and empowering public discourse, contributing to sustainable and equitable social change.

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Notes

¹ See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

² The term "Western media" typically refers to media content produced and consumed by countries in the Western hemisphere, including North America and Western Europe. It encompasses various forms of media, such as television shows, movies, news broadcasting, music, literature, and online platforms. Western media forms reflect the cultural, social, and political values of Western societies and their narratives are often biased against non-Western countries. However, in the digital age of globalization, media production has expanded regions and cultures, thus blurring the traditional boundaries between Western and other media forms.

³ Dharavi, one of Asia's largest slums in Mumbai, India. Spanning approximately 2.1 square kilometers, it is home to an estimated one million people. Known for its poverty, it is also a vibrant economic hub with industries like pottery, textiles, leather, and recycling. The area has garnered global attention through various documentaries and films.

⁴ The reservation system in India refers to affirmative action policies designed to provide historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups, such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC), with access to education, employment, and political representation. These policies aim to address social inequalities and promote social justice by ensuring equitable opportunities for groups that have faced systemic discrimination and exclusion.

⁵ Kerala's "state-sponsored alcoholism" refers to the Kerala government's heavy dependence on revenue from alcohol sales, which is managed through the Kerala State Beverages Corporation (KSBC). While the government has implemented certain restrictions on alcohol sales, it continues to permit and profit from these sales due to their substantial contribution to the state's economy, thus perpetuating high levels of alcohol consumption among the population.

⁶ Toddy shops are local establishments in Kerala that sell toddy, a traditional alcoholic beverage made from the sap of coconut palms. These shops are regulated by the state government and are an integral part of Kerala's drinking culture, offering affordable alcohol primarily to local residents.

⁷ Ayurveda is a traditional system of medicine that originated in India over 3,000 years ago. It emphasizes natural healing through a balance of body, mind, and spirit, using herbal remedies, dietary practices, and lifestyle adjustments to prevent and treat illnesses. Recognized by the Indian government, Ayurveda remains widely practiced alongside modern medicine in India.

⁸ AYUSH refers to the Government of India's initiative promoting traditional systems of medicine: Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy. It is regulated by the Ministry of AYUSH to support research and practice in these fields.
