



থেশ্পিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Peer-Reviewed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-26

Title: Changing Narratives and Visual Culture: A Case of SM Street in Calicut

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63698/thespian.13.2.SF.1906>

Published: 10 April 2026

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Yr. 13, Issue 26, 2025

Autumn Edition
September – October



থ্যেপিয়ান
THE SPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

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Changing Narratives and Visual Culture: A Case of SM Street in Calicut

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Abstract

This paper discusses how changing the narratives can impact the economy and visual culture in an urban space with the example of a particular street in Calicut— SM Street. Sweet Meat Street, or *Mittai Theruvu*, claims a history of five to six hundred years and has been a melting pot of literature, ideas and commerce for a very long period of time. The street is also the protagonist in the acclaimed Malayalam novel *Oru Theruvinte Kadha* (The Story of a Street), written by S.K. Pottekkatt in 1960. In 2017, the state government undertook renovation of this street and was classified under the heritage zone along with the adjacent Mananchira precinct which includes a pond, open ground and a few buildings. Today, the reliefs of Pottekkatt's characters from the novel adorn the walls of the street. The street is pedestrianised, paved with cobblestones and has pendant lamps; the visual culture of the street has changed. Based on an ethnological fieldwork of SM Street, I analyse how a change in narrative can change the economy and visual culture of the urban space. I use Lefebvre's chief argument from *The Production of Space* (1991) that a space is produced through the dialectics between perceived, conceived and lived spaces, to understand how a new space has been produced at SM Street, as it continues to change.

Article History

Received **20 Jan. 2026**

Revised **04 Apr. 2026**

Accepted **06 Apr. 2026**

Keywords

Street, Urban Space,
Narrative, Economy,
Visual Culture



All the characters in this story were real human beings with flesh and blood. Not even one of them is among us now. Acting their designated roles in the great drama, called life, following their own self-motivated life acts, shedding their rays of light, or unruly shadows in the communal sphere, everyone vanished! Not even a single name of them would be seen on any of the pages historians wrote with great toil.

They simply disappeared in the grave, in the funeral pyre, and in the soil! Fore ever! Yet, the street pregnant with their sound and smell still remains smilingly. New shapes are dancing in the street. New footsteps efface the old ones. Thus, those stories have been going on unaltered for centuries.
(Pottekatt, “Forward”, trans., Yoosaph Perambra)

The characters of S.K. Pottekatt’s book *Oru Theruvinte Katha* are no more. Each played their part in their lives and disappeared into the void of time. But the street that was the backdrop of the narrative still exists, undergoing transformations, beholding many stories and lives for centuries.

SM Street (Sweet Meat Street) or Mittayi Theruvu is regarded as ‘the street’ in Pottekatt’s acclaimed novel, although he does not mention that SM Street is ‘the street’ anywhere in his book. In a letter sent home while globetrotting, Pottekkatt wrote, “I just can’t wait to return to Calicut and walk through Mittayi Theru” (qtd. in Jayanth, par. 1). He also used to spend a great deal of time engaging and listening to the people on the street. Perhaps that is why SM Street is considered as ‘the street’ in the novel. In his novel, published in 1960 set at the time of World War II, Pottekatt paints the picture of ‘the street’ through a montage of the lives of characters and their idiosyncrasies.¹ In present day Calicut, a bust of S.K. Pottekatt overlooks the street’s entrance while the reliefs on the left wall depict the scenes and characters from his novel. The reliefs begin with a plate of ‘Oru Theruvinte Katha’ written on it, followed by the foreword of the book by the author.² The relief wall depicts images from the novel such as Modern Medical Shop, Mother Restaurant, Kannan Butler Hotel and Ramdas Jyothishi Thanjavur. It also depicts various scenes, occasionally



adding a few vignettes from the book such as a description of Aysha's beautiful smile by 'the street's' poet Perikkalan Anthru, sightless Murukan's musings about his hatred towards Kunjappu (his mother's new husband) and Kaliyamma's explanation of an airplane to Murukan.

The bust of Pottekkatt looking at SM Street existed since the 1990s before the street was pedestrianised, within a traffic island. But the reliefs representing his novel are more recent and created by mural artist K.U. Krishnakumar as part of the renovation of SM Street in 2017. These reliefs are a physical representation of a nostalgic and romanticised past. It is an attempt to transform the intangible to tangible by inscribing past in the present by government agencies. It can also be seen as an attempt to construct new meanings along with a sanitised aesthetics with cobblestone pavement and hanging lights.

In this paper, I look at how conception of space by government agencies changes the narrative and create new meanings through architecture, aesthetics, and rhetoric construction, drawing from the example of SM Street in Calicut. Lefebvre in his work *The Production of Space* argues that a space is produced through the dialectics between spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces (Lefebvre 38-46). Representations of space or the conceived space is one of the factors in producing space. Although a space is beyond its physicality, conception of space by authorities, architects, urban designers and planners also significantly contribute to the production of space. In the case of SM Street, conception of space by various government agencies have changed the visual culture by altering the narrative, aesthetics and new regulations. This paper attempts to trace this narrative formation through an analysis of events, personal interviews, government documents and other textual and non-textual archives.

SM Street as a Shopping Locale

Shopping locales are always an integral part of any city. From Roman Fora to Greek Agora, Bazaars in eastern countries to Souqs in West Asia, the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul to Arcades in Paris, the size, shape and form of these spaces may vary, so do the goods they sell. Nonetheless they often serve the same purpose— to cater to the needs of the city dwellers. In



addition to selling products, these shopping areas offer a multi-sensorial experience and hence they also become venues where flaneurs and flâneuses stroll around. SM Street is an important locale for shopping in the city of Calicut. It was the most preferred commercial area by business owners and residents of the city. As the primacy of the city of Calicut is quite high, besides residents, it is also frequented by people from villages and towns in Kozhikode district, as well as neighbouring districts.³

SM street along with Mananchira are often described as the ‘heart of the city’ in popular descriptions. As Calicut was a port city, the spaces of commerce were close to the shore with Valiyangadi being the wholesale market.⁴ SM Street lies east of Valiyangadi and the railway line, with Mananchira Square located North to the street. It was the centre of retail sales as well. So, geographically and functionally, this street was the ‘heart of the city’ for a significant period. The city boundary has gradually expanded further to the East, North and South and many more shopping centres have developed across the city. Therefore, SM Street does not remain the heart of the city anymore.

Ummem Bappem allathathokke kittum Mittayi Therulu is a popular colloquial saying which literally translates as, ‘one can find everything besides mother and father on SM



Photo 1: View of SM Street (Before Renovation of 2017). DTPC Kozhikode. Retrieved from <https://www.dtpckozhikode.com/destination/mittayitheruvu-sm-street>



Street'. The street's capacity to cater to everyone's needs is evident in this saying. The street has been the retail market for textiles, readymades, footwears, fancy ornaments, home appliances and plastic goods.

Latheef, an interlocutor who is a shareholder in business in SM Street mentioned that the mode of business in the street has changed over the years. Before the 1990s, one had to own a building to do business there. Consequently, the shop owners came from wealthier backgrounds as the establishment costs were quite high. The nature of business has changed significantly from the early 1990s. The shop owners started leasing out their shops to groups of people who ventured into business. These new businesses were formed by groups of salesmen from established shops and sellers on footpaths. But such shops were very few during that period. Towards the late 1990s, the number of such businesses increased. The shops are often leased for three years based on a verbal agreement. Occasionally, these leases are renewed and other times they are not. Hence, besides a handful of permanent establishments, the nature of businesses in SM Street have also become temporary owing to the temporariness of the space. In addition, the number of stakeholders has increased as the shop owners and sellers are different.

Over the years, the nature of products in SM Street have changed with change in consumer culture. As it is a major shopping area, it caters to the needs of the customers. Anything that is in style can be found in textiles, clothing, footwear and fancy ornaments. This transformation from quality products by established sellers to modern and trending products by temporary sellers happened over time. According to Latheef, the older merchants are not equipped to deal with the shifts in the business model which sells trending products that keeps on changing.

SM Street Renovation

The renovation of SM Street had been called for by the authority, merchants and other stakeholders alike since the 1990s (*Deccan Chronicle*). But it took years to materialise as there was no consensus among the merchants and the authority about the type of renovation. The authorities proposed pedestrianisation as part of beautification and heritagisation while



the shop owners and merchants vehemently opposed it. The merchants and shop owners believed that pedestrianising the street would adversely impact the sales. According to Sathar (name changed), who is a shopkeeper in SM Street, the authorities were indecisive whether the tourism department or corporation should undertake the renovation.

In 2009, the move to heritagise the street emerged when the Minister of Tourism of Kerala announced the allocation of 50 million rupees for heritage commercial centres within the state that included SM Street in Calicut, Chalai market in Thiruvananthapuram and Broadway and Mattancherry market in Ernakulam (*Kerala Tourism*). Sunita Goray Raj in an article published in *The Rahnuma Daily* writes that when Kodiyeri Balakrishnan was the Minister of Tourism, he approached the shop owners of SM Street to discuss beautification and heritagisation.⁵ Further, she notes that the owners voiced their concerns about a vehicular ban affecting their business adversely; as a result, the minister dropped the plan (Raj⁶).

In February 2017, the demand for renovation resurfaced after a major fire broke out in the street. The density of built forms and lack of proper infrastructure in the street caused multiple fires and the demand for renovation surfaced each time. There were such incidents in 1995, 2007, 2010, 2015 and 2016 as well (*The New Indian Express*, “Major fire breaks...”, lines 12-6). In 2007, there was a fire that killed four people in Oasis Compound, which is on an adjacent street, MP Road. Even after renovation in 2017, there was a major fire accident in the locality in 2021 (*The Hindu*, “Major fire outbreak...”, par. 7). This indicates how justifications provided by the governmental agencies are often misleading. Also, the traders were not against renovation and urged the government to clean the gutters and fix the footpath. They were concerned about factors affecting their sales such as pedestrianisation, beautification and choosing the right time for renovation as majority of the sales happen during the festive season (*The New Indian Express*, “Traders furious...”, pars. 2-3).

The appearance of the street took priority in design and the convenience of the users were overlooked. The image (Photo 2) shows a photograph of SM Street with the metal frames and cluster lamp holders. In a conversation, Anil stated that “the hanging lamps meant to light up the street, worked only when the Chief Minister came to inaugurate.”⁷ This



example illustrates how weatherproofing and durability of lamps have not been considered while choosing them.



Photo 2: View of SM Street (After Renovation of 2017). Photograph by Author taken on 01.02.2025.



Photo 3: Flooring Material of SM Street (After Renovation of 2017). Photograph by Author taken on 28.01.2025

The ocularcentric approach to design can be observed in the features of the pedestrianised street. Cobblestones used on the street have become a symbol of civilisation in both developed and developing countries. There are variants of cobblestones with flat surfaces that are also available in the market and have been used in other public projects in Calicut such as in the case of Cultural Beach. But on SM Street, even though the street is pedestrianised, the material chosen is not suitable for a pedestrian street. This design choice demonstrates how the aesthetic of the street took precedence in design while the function was disregarded. And it also sheds light on how the conceptualisations and choices of the conceivers of spaces continue to impact the lives of people. Similar to the choice of lighting, the flooring material for the street has also disregarded the context. While the flooring causes



discomfort by posing health risks, the lighting prompts the shopkeepers to find alternate solutions to light up the street.



Photo 4: View of SM Street (After Renovation of 2017). Photograph by Author taken on 26.02.2020

The renovation of SM Street which was undertaken in 2017 was not a mere repair work, but also a reconstruction and rebranding to cater to a tourist crowd, although ‘renovation’ was the term used by the government agencies. But in the inauguration’s invitation card, ‘SM Street Heritage Programme’ was used. The heritage value of SM Street comes from the fact that it was a shopping space for centuries. Rather than the tangible structures on the street, it is the history of the locale which is intangible that adds to the heritage value of the street. The renovation of the street attempted to reconceptualise the space based on a European imagination of heritage street by pedestrianising the street with cobblestones and hanging lights.

A multi-level parking was proposed at the entrance of the street to be constructed



before pedestrianisation to prevent that from affecting the sales, but the pedestrianisation of SM Street was carried out without providing a parking space. As the street is located close to other streets and there is traffic congestion around the locality, the absence of parking space affected the business. In December 2017, the street was renovated and opened to the public (*Deccan Chronicle*, “SM Street Reopens...”, par. 1). However, the parking plaza has not been constructed even after seven years of renovation. In an urban space, seven years is ample time to change the mode of operation. As a result, many old traders moved to other parts of the city with better parking facilities.

Inclusion in Heritage Zone

In 2017, SM Street was classified under the heritage zone along with the adjacent Mananchira precinct which houses the Mananchira Square, Comtrust factory and buildings around Mananchira. Although the land use of SM Street still remains commercial, the Master Plan for Kozhikode Urban Area- 2035 sanctioned in 2017 and Master Plan for Kozhikode City- 2040 proposed in 2024 categorised SM Street under the heritage zone.⁸

A set of regulations for any renovation or new construction in the heritage zone are prescribed in the Master Plans which are applicable to any new construction or renovation of buildings on the street. An examination of these regulations conveys how the space was envisioned and conceived by the governmental agencies. The regulation prescribes the number of floors permitted, height of buildings, paint colour for walls, roof type, material for the roof and pitch of the sloped roof (Town and Country Planning Department, “Master . . . 2035”, 391-2; “Master . . . 2040”, 25-6). The shops can have a maximum of two floors above ground level and height of the building should not exceed 9 meters. Basements are not permitted in the plan. The exterior wall facing the street should be painted in white or off-white. The wall surface has to be plain without textures or stucco. Mangalore tiles should be the material for roof on the street facing side, with a pitch of 35-40 degree and sloping towards the street. These regulations envisage the street as a space with an aesthetics that is being constructed and popularised as traditional Kerala architecture. Here, the agencies use architecture and urban design to create new meanings and thereby tangibilising the intangible



through a romanticised imagination of the past.

Additionally, any modifications such as “development, redevelopment, construction including additions, alterations, repairs, renovations, replacement of special and architectural features, demolition of any part or whole thereof in respect of any objects or buildings in the area, coming under heritage zone” requires permission from the Art and Heritage Commission, “to conserve the heritage character” (Town and Country Planning Department, “Master . . . 2035”, 390; “Master . . . 2040”, 26).⁹ Here, more regulations and one more governmental organisation is introduced to overlook and ensure heritagisation. As argued in the previous section, SM Street does not have a ‘heritage character’; the locale has a history which is an intangible heritage. The ‘heritage character’ as imagined by architects, urban designers and the governmental agencies are imposed on a regular shopping street, thereby producing a new shopping space.

Heritagisation is a growing trend that is becoming integral to tourism. In Kerala, tourism is a major source of revenue focused on heritage and culture. Kerala has been trying to popularise its presence in the cultural map of the world. The state aspires to become a cultural destination with events such as Kochi-Muziris Biennale in Kochi since 2012, Kerala Literature Festival in Calicut since 2016 and most recently UNESCO City of Literature for Calicut in 2023. The government agencies in Kerala actively engage in placemaking and creating destinations to promote tourism. Renovation of SM Street was one part of this programme.

Aesthetics and New Meanings

The tourism promotion video of SM Street on the Kerala tourism website is titled “SM Street| #Walk Down Memory Lane”. This 92 second video begins with ‘I love Kozhikode’ set at the beach, with a red heart which is omnipresent in cities and towns across the world. Then it shows a glimpse of *Ice urathi* preparation and soon moves to colourful *halwas*.¹⁰ A glimpse of the relief plate *Oru theruvinte Katha* follows that. Then the video shows some local people sitting, chatting and walking on the street. The close up of *halwas* appears again with the pop-up text, “a go to place for Malabar Delicacies” (Kerala tourism,



“SM Street...”, 0:24-0:27). The next pop-up text mentions “replete with rows of stalls peppered with sweets and savouries” (0:35-0:38) along with some images of sweets. Next, a close up of *halwas* and people appear on the same frame, followed by three white tourists strolling the street. The next frame shows two girls from behind, followed by colourful *halwas* again with a caption stating “shop for the best Kozhikodan Halwa” (0:51-0:55). The subsequent image-text notes, “reflects the memories of a bygone era” (1:07-1:09) and portrays older men.

Contrary to its name Sweet Meat Street and descriptions everywhere about *halwa* shops on the street, there were only a couple of *halwa* shops and bakeries. It was always followed by textiles, readymade and footwear shops. The present-day SM street also houses less than a few bakeries or *halwa* shops. Hence, the claim of Kerala tourism website that SM Street is lined with bakeries offering various kinds of baked goods and *halwa* needs to be examined to ascertain how new meanings are ascribed to the street (Kerala Tourism, “...the Busiest Street...”, pars. 9-10).

The heritage of SM Street lies in three intangible factors: first in its name *Mittayi Theruvu* or Sweet Meat Street, second in the history of the locale as a shopping street and third being the setting of S.K. Pottekkatt’s, *The Story of a Street*. The government agencies made these tangible by giving it a physical form. They used art, architecture and placemaking techniques on a bustling Indian shopping street. Even the art used is very relevant to the street– Pottekkatt’s characters from his novel. Here, a new narrative is constructed using a combination of historical and literary narratives. The nature of the street changes by assigning a cultural meaning to it. For instance, the Corporation Mayor and children of acclaimed Malayalam writers gathered and read books by Pottekkatt’s bust on the street to celebrate the conferring of UNESCO City of Literature to the city of Calicut (*The Hindu*, “Reading Session...”, par. 1). SM Street has seen a wide range of protests throughout the years– 2010s were mostly regarding spatial contestations, rallies by merchants on the street to lift the vehicular ban. However, with new aesthetics and cultural meanings attributed to it, a different space is produced.



Using Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space, I can ascertain that SM Street as imagined and conceived by the state brings about a rupture in its spatial practice and affects its representational spaces. Any change enforced upon an urban space, thus, alters the produced space. SM Street has been the busiest street in the city for decades. The street does not require an advertisement portraying white tourists to attract a crowd. The street used to be so crowded on the days before major festivals such as Onam or Eid-ul-fitr as the usual saying goes 'one does not have to walk, but you are pushed through with the sheer number of people who come to shop for clothes, footwear and fancy ornaments'. The sales have been affected by shopping malls and brand culture. Nonetheless, as Latheef mentioned, "a commercial space like SM Street always generates a certain revenue and is profitable for the businesses"¹¹ (06:19-06:29). But the pedestrianisation of the street was done prior to having a parking plaza which has affected the businesses there. This instance, therefore, elucidates how the representations of space is a determining factor in transforming the production of space on SM Street.

The new aesthetics and narratives that go along with it create new meanings for this particular street. Once a bustling shopping street for textiles, clothes and footwear is now known as a place for *halwa*, at least in the government's narrative. Despite all the substantial changes, my continued fieldwork has pointed out how the space has been accommodating new changes, and at each instance, producing distinct spaces. Will it transform to a *halwa* street that attracts tourists or start housing branded outlets after the parking plaza is constructed? Or will it continue to be the busiest street in Calicut providing everything like the colloquial saying? The answers lie in the unfolding of time. However, such a transformation imagined and conceived by government agencies would not be as desired because a space is produced through negotiations between all the actors.



End Notes

¹ Koonan Kanaran, Irachikkandam Moideen, Nondipparangodan, Appu Nayar, Sudhakaran, Malathi, Radhakrishnan, newspaper seller Paper Krishna Kuruppu or Vishamasthithi Kuruppu, his daughter Radha, Omanchi, Kelu Master, Ramunni Master, Ramdas Jyothishi Thanjavur, Omanchi's assistant Aristotle Ayyappan, Vasu Doctor, rickshaw puller Paily, Amina, Beeran, Anthru, Murukan and Aysha are few among the many characters he wrote about.

² A translated version of the same is provided at the beginning of the paper.

³ The city of Calicut has an urban primacy of 7.3. Urban primacy can be defined as the central place in an urban or city network that has acquired or obtained a great level of dominance. The level of dominance is measured by population density and the number of functions offered. Higher functions and population will result in higher dominance. Calicut becomes a primate city because there is a direct dependency on this city by second, third and fourth order settlements. (Fathima)

⁴ Valiyangadi in Malayalam means Big Bazaar which is also another name of the place.

⁵ Kodyeri Balakrishnan was Minister of Home Affairs and Tourism in Kerala during 2006-2011 Achudanandan ministry.

⁶ The article, accessed in 2020 September is not available online at the moment. Even though I have contacted the Newspaper, my mails were unanswered. Hence, I do not have the paragraph numbers for this citation.

⁷ To maintain anonymity, a pseudonym has been used for the interlocutor. He is a shopkeeper at SM Street. The conversation was held on 24.01.2025 and was recorded in the field notebook. The photograph of the steel framework with a lack of light source exemplifies Anil's point.

⁸ A Master Plan is a document that outlines the long-term plan for a particular area published by the government or governmental agencies. In this case, it was published by the Town and Country Planning Department, Government of Kerala.

⁹ The Art and Heritage Commission was constituted by the Government under Rule 154 of the Kerala Municipality Building Rules in 1999.

¹⁰ *Ice urathi* is a dish sold in carts along the beach in Calicut.

¹¹ Pseudonym has been used for anonymity. Telephonic conversation, held on 08.01.2025 and audio has been recorded. File with the author.



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