Industry, Aesthetics, Spectatorial Subjectivities: A Study on Malayalam Cinema of the 1950s

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by

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis, titled ***INDUSTRY, AESTHETICS, SPECTATORIAL SUBJECTIVITIES: A STUDY ON MALAYALAM CINEMA OF THE 1950s*****,** submitted by Mr. Jenson Joseph for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication is a record of research carried out under my supervision and guidance in the Department of Communication, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad.

The thesis or parts thereof has not been submitted for any other degree or diploma at this or any other University.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis titled ***INDUSTRY, AESTHETICS, SPECTATORIAL SUBJECTIVITIES: A STUDY ON MALAYALAM CINEMA OF THE 1950s*** submitted to University of Hyderabad for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication is a record of research done by me under Dr. P Thirumal, Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad. This work has not been submitted in part or in full for the award of any degree or diploma at this or any other University.

Jenson Joseph

Hyderabad
Date:

To

My Amma and Appachan,

the secret cinephiles…

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Introduction

One of the primary challenges before an academic project on Malayalam cinema is to engage with, make sense of, and move beyond, the 'exceptional' status of its object of analysis. Malayalam cinema 'stands out' mainly in two ways. We often come across, in contemporary debates and historical narratives, references to even popular cinema in Malayalam as showing a certain propensity to adopt closer-to-life themes, in contrast to Indian popular cinema's perceived affinity to myth and fantasy-oriented tales. In addition, in the discussions on the distinctive mode of politics in South India, in which cinema and (the regional) language attain crucial importance, Kerala and Malayalam cinema do not seem to fit in easily. There have been important attempts at problematizing this 'exceptional' status of Malayalam cinema, which begin by directly asking the question: what does the anomaly indicate? Significantly, a revisiting of the vibrant decade of the 1950s becomes central to all these debates.

This project embarks on a different route of enquiry by provisionally setting aside the qualifications, omissions and silences which mark the field of Malayalam cinema in the contemporary debates, and attempts to construct a historical account about the dominant commercial-aesthetic tendencies that can be identified in cinema in Kerala during and around the decade of the 1950s, and

the political-cultural dynamics that shaped them. In other words, rather than letting the contemporary debates and the conventional histories frame or set the terms of our study, this thesis attempts to situate the analysis firmly within the period under consideration, from where it could try to make sense of the later discussions about Malayalam cinema of the period, as and when we come across them. Of course, there are no possible ways of inventing magical formulas to 'directly' access a historical period outside the contemporary debates that surround it and, in many ways, make them accessible to us. However, the intention here is to make an effort at avoiding the risks of looking at a particular period or the interventions of various historical agents through the lens of what is at stake in the contemporary debates – an approach that can often obliterate the political-cultural energies specific to the period and the region. Thus, the historical analysis embarked here is not a search for the genealogy of a particular aesthetic or representational strategy, but an enquiry into cinema in Kerala during and around the vibrant decade of the 1950s animated by different historical agents' interventions in the medium, and how their specific political-cultural interests worked themselves, directly or indirectly, into the film texts.

As it engages with films coming under a range of genres, the analytical mode in the thesis combines, and often oscillates between, the devices of close textual analysis and historicization. Though the decade of the 1950s and its political-cultural energies emerge as central to the analytical framework, the periodization

overlaps, thus taking up for critical analysis films spanning from *Jeevithanowka* (The Boat of Life; K Vembu, 1951), a popular social produced by Udaya studio, to *Bhargaveenilayam* (The Haunted House; A Vincent, 1964), one of the first films that systematically articulated the disillusionment of various sections of the population in the region with the political-cultural vision proposed by the Left which de-legitimized the affects of faith and sentiment. Moving away from the tendencies of analyzing films as screen-reflections of reality, the thesis approaches cinema as a medium that *re-presents*, and works with, already existing representations of social relations; cinema thus becomes a site of contestations over the representation of social relations which structures our reality. Moreover, the project looks at cinema as an industrial-cultural institution that develops its own resources of materials and signifying practices which can be mobilized, appropriated and redeployed in varying combinations and contexts to conjure up new meanings and affects. Hence, it pays much attention to the significations associated with various genres, the sedimented meanings that the image of an actor/actress carries, as well as the energies that various narrative elements can mobilize directly or indirectly, to construct a historical account of how Malayalam cinema of the 1950s engaged with various commercial, cultural and historical imperatives that animated the region and its film industry during the period.

In a nutshell, the thesis analyses Malayalam cinema of the 1950s as animated by the attempts of the aesthetic of 'social realism' – proposed by the Left-affiliated artists and writers – striving to achieve hegemony by proposing a Malayali nation based on rational, secular values, and the oppositional articulations to this dominant aesthetic that found expressions, often in covert and commodified forms, in various marginal genres of films produced by the radically commercial film industry that emerged in Malayalam towards the end of the decade and during the early 1960s. Apart from the available films of the period, I have depended on archival sources – especially magazines, government records, newspaper reports, advertisements – and the memoirs and autobiographies of famous personalities and pioneers of Malayalam cinema, to construct this narrative.

Indian cinema of the 1950s

The critical understanding on Indian cinema of the 1950s developed by film studies in India, over the last two decades, serves as a backdrop for the analytical framework adopted in this project to examine and comprehend the narrative, thematic and textual elements deployed in Malayalam cinema during the period across genres, even while being attentive to the socio-historical contexts specific to the region that result in some of the distinct characteristics of the region's cinema of that time. The project, thus, tries to understand Malayalam cinema as a

cultural institution sharing aesthetic and formal features that cinema in India, or even South East Asia in general, has come to acquire, their specificities being closely linked to the nature of the modern democratic imaginary operational in these regions. Scholars of Indian cinema consider the 1950s as a significant period in the cultural history of cinema in the country, and the decade's films as important reference points to identify predominant aesthetic practices, their specificities contrasted with the conventions of Hollywood cinema, and the socio-historical imperatives that define Indian popular cinema's dominant textual form and narrative preoccupations.

Hindi films of this period have been analyzed for, among other things, the loose assemblage of attractions that they were, the centrality it afforded to romance which nevertheless did not have parental sanction, the narrative structure that reasserted the feudal moral imperatives, their indifference to the elements of suspense and surprise, the deployment of family as the model for representing the society and its implications, the conventions that have been carried over to cinema from the local indigenous oral and visual culture traditions, and their melodramatic form which often address the spectators as public rather than as individuals.[1] Informed by the debates in political theory in India that have suggested that communities, rather than individuals, functioned as the political

[1] The works of Rosie Thomas 1985; Ravi Vasudevan 1989, 1993; Ashish Rajadhyaksha 1987, 1993, 2000; and Madhava Prasad 1998, 2011; are some of the important attempts at identifying and analyzing the implications of these aspects. See also Chapter 3 in Vitali 2008.

actors and subjects in India's history of democratic politics[2], film scholars have argued that Indian melodrama, especially of the 1950s, addressed its audiences as public rather than individuated, in contrast to Hollywood narrative cinema that ideally addressed the spectators through individuated codes and conventions. The diegetic characters' occasional look into the camera In Indian popular cinema – thus breaking the codes of realism that produce an individuated spectatorial position – is only one aspect of this. Analyzing *Andaz* (Mehboob Khan, 1949), Ravi Vasudevan (1993) has persuasively argued that Indian social films and melodramas of the 1950s, even while adopting the conventions of Hollywood continuity cinema – like the eye-line match, point-of-view shot, match-on-action cuts, etc – also deploys other modes of visual representation like tableau shots and iconic frames to situate the spectator's subjectivity within the space of the social code. He illustrates this by examining a sequence in the film – which otherwise follows the conventions of Hollywood narrative cinema – in which a tableau shot is effectively deployed to allow the censuring gaze of society to bring a halt to an 'illegitimate' romance that develops between the heroine and the protagonist. He points out that "the address has an encompassing normative aspect to it which momentarily throws us out of the flow of individual awareness" (Vasudevan 2010: 85-6). In Vasudevan's words:

[2] See Kaviraj 1995, 1996; Chatterjee 1998; and Veena Das 1996.

> If melodrama in Indian popular film constructed a subjectivity at once personalized and public, it also addressed its audiences in crucial ways as public rather than individuated. For, in its methods of representation, its construction and articulation of character types and character expression, and the particular way it tied intimate circumstances, perceptions, and familial ties to a drama beyond the individual, this is a species of melodrama which repeatedly highlights itself not only as an insistently exteriorized but also public way of talking about the human condition. This is observable in crucial, symbolically charged passages of character conversation, where speech moves into a register beyond the interpersonal: its idioms and pitch are designed to invoke a larger discursive frame of reference: moral, normative, even critical and contesting. Not only does the speech and visage pose this as supra-individuated, it also suggests that it is aimed at an audience beyond the one presented within the fiction. (Vasudevan 2010: 43)

The thematic preoccupations usually identified as typical of Hindi cinema have also been analyzed by various scholars to draw insights about their political-historical significance. Discussing the implications of the joint feudal family as a recurring narrative backdrop in the Hindi melodramas between the 1940s and the 1960s, Madhava Prasad (1998) has demonstrated how this aspect is linked to the ways in which the commercial energies and the psychic drives of a modern industrial medium like cinema have been appropriated and contained in the Indian context. The theme in these “feudal family romances” often revolved around a romance that did not have the sanction of the patriarchal elder, very

often the father-figure. "This basic narrative structure, where the unity and jouissance of the feudal family, its control over its accumulated wealth, is threatened by usurpers and modern values [...] could incorporate consumerism and other 'modern' features without damage as long as it did not slide into a position of affirmation of new sexual and social relations based on individualism" (Prasad 1998: 67).

In Prasad's influential formulation, cinema is an industrial medium wedded to certain consumerist aspirations and modern scopic drives. Through feudal family romances, Hindi film industry finds a way to incorporate consumerist aspirations, 'modern' desires and aspirations for social transformation, but in such a way as to contain them by restoring the authority of the reformed joint family and the patriarchal elder. Prasad reads this narrative structure as characteristic of the passive revolution in India, in which bourgeois transformation had to work through feudal forms and the new structures of power like the bureaucracy.[3] The privileging, in these films, of the feudal order ruled by the patriarchal elder over the state is noteworthy in this context. These narratives often tended "to privilege the moral sphere over the legal"; the speech "is conventional, contrived and excessive"; "the characters are objects of emulation or disapproval rather than identification" (ibid: 69).

[3] See Chatterjee 1986, Kaviraj 1988 on the nature of the transition from colonial to post-colonial nation-state in India as well as other post-colonial regions, and on the specific forms that the political structure has taken in India following Independence.

Theories of melodrama in the West become important reference points for Prasad's formulations. Studies about family melodrama in the West have pointed out the importance of this genre in the context of social transformation. Peter Brooks (1976) has argued that in the nineteenth century, when melodrama emerged as a form, it dealt with anxieties arising out of the social transition from a universe of traditional meaning and hierarchical authorities to modern social structures. For Brooks, melodramatic narratives always attempt to recover the securities of the "pre-modern", "sacred" universe; the plots depended heavily on personalities; and the family became a crucial site for staging conflicts. Prasad sees affinities between Indian film melodramas with the film melodrama of the west, but argues that the former's narrative structure is closer to the stage melodrama of early nineteenth-century Europe and America. Drawing on Grimsted's (1968) study of the latter, he points out that the class structure in these American melodramas remained generally feudal and predominantly populated with kings and peasants, lords and ladies. These narratives of belligerently egalitarian feudalism often told the stories of princes in disguise as a servant, for example. The twists in the plot would cancel out the egalitarian displacement often through a last minute disclosure of the lowly character's noble birth. These plays could also be read as a mechanism of aristocratic self-legitimization. For Prasad, a similar feudal structure provides the basic framework for a majority of Indian film melodrama between 1940s and 1960s.

Complicating Prasad's argument that the patriarchal joint family melodramas continued to remain the dominant narrative form in Hindi cinema through the 1950s, Vasudevan (2010: Chapter 1) contends that after Independence a new form of popular investment in *the nation-state* is palpable in Hindi and other language films, displacing earlier forms of authority. The patriarchal joint family narratives continued to be significant, but as an aspect of the family social film genre. The attempts to imagine a public order superior to the patriarchal family's authority can be identified in most of the post-Independence social films. In these narratives, "the state, as vehicle for the recognition and amelioration of social victimhood and injustice, emerges as a crucial site of action and recognition." (ibid: 49-51). Hindi cinema deployed various narrative elements to register this move away from the horizontal, hermetic family register. Vasudevan points out the urban thrillers as one example. In these thrillers, the prominent narrative backdrop shifted to the urban spaces, the city, the street, etc., and the narrative solution in them often highlighted the state as the paramount authority. Another instance is that of Bengali melodramas of the 1950s which surpassed familial-social network of authority by producing a fantasy space for the lead couple. Citing the works of Moinak Biswas (2001), Vasudevan points out that in Bengali melodramas, this involved the production of a privatized fantasy space – a realm of interiority – "where the couple could constitute itself untrammeled by the familial form" (ibid: 52). This space of the couple could often exercise pressure on the repressive co-ordinates of the familial-public nexus.

Talking about yet another recurring narrative format that strives to displace the patriarchal family authority, Vasudevan draws our attention to films in which the nurturing mother held a central, iconic position. In these films (like *Awara;* Raj Kapoor, 1949), which attempt to institute the middle class hero as the new authority in the social and the familiar spaces, the iconic presence of the mother – stable in her virtue and her place – serves as a moral orientation for her son and also a figuration of the past. Here, the familial space, occupied by the iconic figure of the mother, has a different function other than denoting the patriarchal authority of the father. This (familial) space of the mother often protects the son – the middle class protagonist – from the perils of the social void by binding him back to it. It thus functions as a moral order to fall back on while the shift of authority from the father to the son takes place under the benign agency of the law. The space of the mother gives way to the "nucleated" space over which the middle class hero must exercise authority (ibid: 89-90).

The Southern scenario and the curious case of Kerala

If the critical understandings about the context and the nature of the political transformation from colonialism to the post-colonial nation state in India provide a crucial framework to approach Hindi cinema of the 1950s, the cinema of the period in South Indian languages have received academic attention as sites for understanding the distinct mode of democratic imaginary that operates in these

regions, and its relations to the immense popularity and political power that some of the film stars enjoy in the southern linguistic states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In these regions, the institution of cinema has played a crucial role in facilitating the 'imagining'[4] of linguistic (sub)nationalities. This peculiar relationship between cinema and the democratic social imaginary epitomized itself most vividly in the huge fan-adulation enjoyed by a number of stars from these film industries, often resulting in the latters' victories in electoral politics – an aspect that has been studied by many scholars.[5]

Prasad (1999) identifies a combination of historical conditions – the emergence of linguistically homogeneous markets for cinema in India with the advent of the sound film, the end of colonial rule which made visible the void in the place of patriarchal authority, the advent of electoral politics and the re-organization of

[4] Here, I am drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1983) influential formulation about print capitalism as one of the fundamental facilitating factors in the emergence of the nationalist sentiment in the Americas, in Europe and in Russia. He has famously termed nationalities as 'imagined communities' – large anonymous socialities formed by the simultaneous experience of, among other things, reading the daily newspaper. See Srinivas (2010a) for the links between the film industry's attempts to consolidate linguistic markets and the evolution of the cultural map of the "Telugu nation".

[5] See Hardgrave Jr. 1979, Sivathamby 1981, Pandian 1992 and Dickey 2001, for studies on various aspects of the film stars' success in political power structures in South Indian regions. These accounts mostly explain the phenomena in terms of the manipulative power of cinema as a medium that nurtures certain star images, thrusts them on the masses and tries to influence their thinking. See Prasad's essays (1999, 2009) that argue for an understanding of the mass popularity and political power of the film stars in South India as arising in the political context of the emergence of linguistic nationalities in the South Indian regions, that operate as 'nations' within the overarching parameters of the Indian nation-state, and whose political-cultural self-expression often takes on covert dimensions. Given cinema's crucial role in facilitating the linguistic national sentiments in these regions, its mode of address came to acquire political overtones; the male star came to represent the linguistic nation per se. See Srinivas 1996, 1997, 2009 on the complex nature of the relationship between the spectator and the star, and for discussions on the obsessive and performative dimensions of fan activities.

the states according to dominant languages, the decline of the film studios and the increasing dependence on star value as a factor in film production, and the ideology of passive revolution which made pedagogic relations between cultural producers and consumers an essential feature of social and cultural life – as the factors that contributed to the emergence of a situation where "cinema […] came to be chosen as the site of a strong political investment, where audiences responded with enthusiasm to an offer of leadership emanating from the screen …" (Prasad 1999: 49). This approach problematizes the dominant ways of understanding star-worship as the result of the 'false-consciousness' of gullible spectators. Pointing out the inconsistencies in such accounts, Prasad instead suggests that the "cine-politics" and the structures of star-adulation in these regions are manifestations of the mass audience's participation in a supplementary, virtual political representation which subsists underneath the parliamentary system.[6] Extending this, Prasad has argued in a later essay (2009) that the peculiar forms of fan culture and cine-politics in the three south Indian states constitute part of a cultural politics set in motion by the ideology of popular/subaltern sovereignty, the orders of which could be at odds with the theory of sovereign citizenship. The insights that Prasad's formulation provides

[6] This formulation, in many ways, anticipates political theorist Partha Chatterjee's (2004) observation that in India, like in many modern democracies, due to various historical reasons the political domain is marked by an internal structural division between 'civil society' and 'political society'. Chatterjee identifies political society as a domain marked by forms of popular mobilizations that often spill over the rational forms of democratic politics, as opposed to the domain of civil society where political articulations are firmly determined on the premise of the modern citizen.

us about the centrality of the Madras-based industry, between the 1930s and the 1950s, in the history of cinema in the Southern language states are of immediate significance to our project.

Significantly, the star-worshipping cults typical of the other South Indian regions are not visible in Kerala, until at least the late 1990s. In a recent essay, Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2010) has suggested that this need not signify the exemption of the region from the distinctive mode of popular politics operational in South India. He argues that in the case of Kerala, "the 'popular' is something that might have to be theorised horizontally – relating cinema and other institutions, like Communist Party, for example – rather than vertically, as a story within the history of cinema" (ibid: 34). The essay invites our attention to the paradoxical nature of the Left's political mobilization in Kerala, where even as the Communist Party remains firmly committed to the ideals of rationality at the official level, it accommodates and maintains 'irrational' domains of leader-adulation, rituals, belief systems, etc., to retain its mass support base. Arguing that the domain of the popular remains discursively erased in Kerala due to the role the Communist Party has played in keeping it intact, he says:

> The existence of the Left in Kerala, like the structures of the political in Tamil Nadu (for example), exceeds the limits of the rational political public as it makes itself visible in modern Kerala. An invisible domain of beliefs, irrational structures of knowledge, fandom, rituals and practices remain the central structure within which the politics of rationality is

> played out. This allows for the Communist Party to exercise complete hegemony in spheres outside parliamentary politics even when they are not triumphant in the elections. (Ibid: 41)

These formulations about Indian cinema of the 1950s, as well as the specific political dimensions that the South Indian cinema assumed during the period, provide us with certain basic frameworks to situate our object of study in the political-cultural map of the post-colonial nation-state and the context of linguistic nationalism in the South.

Malayalam film studies: A brief overview

There have not been many attempts at studying various aspects of cinema in Kerala before the 1950s.[7] The existing scholarship on this area tends to consider the initial filmmaking attempts in Malayalam as moments of rupture beginning to constitute an autonomous field of "Malayalam cinema". This approach does not give much attention to the parameters of the film business which was already in operation in the region before the local initiatives in filmmaking emerged. The films are often analyzed by looking at the storyline and juxtaposing them with the region's social-political context of the time so as to draw insights into what

[7] Bindu Menon's (2005) work on the governmental regulations and the anxieties about the exhibition halls in Travancore during the 1920s and 1930s, and Muraleedharan's (2005) essay that attempts to identify various socio-historical imperatives specific to the region that determined the early filmmaking attempts in Malayalam, are some of the very few significant attempts that looks at cinema in Kerala before the 1950s. Also see Menon 2009; 2011 for accounts on two failed attempts at making films in Malayalam during the 1940s.

they had to tell about various historical events. Our understanding of the early Malayalam films could change fundamentally once we take into consideration the industrial-cultural contexts within which the film industry operated in the regions that constitute the present Kerala until the late 1940s, which set the terms for the early attempts in commercial filmmaking. These include the structures of the exhibition-distribution sectors – controlled mostly by Tamil capital and depending almost entirely on films made in production centres outside Kerala – and also the wider geographies of production and circulation that the film industry in India, including the production centres in the south, were entangled in during the time.

The cinema of the 1950s also remains largely a black hole, even when a significant number of studies on Malayalam cinema of the later periods revisit the socialist realist cinema of the 1950s, especially those made by P Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat, as historical texts that set certain aesthetic standards which were much lauded in dominant historical accounts. The academic attention on Malayalam cinema has concentrated mostly on various aspects of the institution after the 1970s, when commercial cinema in Malayalam was exploring numerous modes of engaging with the desires and anxieties circulating at the margins of the dominant social-cultural order, at the formal as well as thematic level. Various studies point towards a palpable shift in the conventions in commercial cinema after the 1970s, as the 'conventional' family-centred narratives began

giving way to tales from other locations. The works of S Sanjeev, Jenny Rowena, T Muraleedharan, Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, Navaneetha Mokkil, Bindu Menon and C S Venkiteswaran constitute an important body in the studies on Malayalam cinema after the 1970s.

Rowena's (2002) influential thesis on Malayalam comedy films, for example, examines the economic-cultural contexts in which comedy emerged as a popular genre by the 1990s in Kerala. These contexts included the breakdown of the celebrated 'Kerala Model' of development, the losing currency of family melodrama in cinema and other popular cultural forms, the high rate of employment among women especially from the dominant castes, and the new avenues that the Gulf economy opened up for the marginal communities in the region. Rowena argues that these conditions led to a restructuring of Malayalam cinema's conventional narrative form, as comedy tracks, which were till then relegated to the margins of the dominant narrative of family romance, began attaining centrality. These popular comedy films, featuring smaller stars, narrated the travails of unsuccessful young men in pursuit of a fortune. The bonding between men (of different castes and communities), their constant anxieties about masculinity, the increased visibility of subaltern men and 'emancipated' upper caste women were the most striking features about them. She argues that these films, while affording thematic centrality to the desires and anxieties of subaltern men, offered avenues of "remasculinization", thus

reproducing the "casteist patriarchy" where the upper caste woman becomes the desirable *objects*, and effecting a near-total erasure of the lower caste woman and her subjectivity. Her thesis discusses the socio-realist film of the 1950s as important reference points of aesthetic standards in the traditional histories of Malayalam cinema.[8]

Muralidharan's (2001) study on the "male-bonding" in Mohanlal's films during the 1990s places itself in the historical context of the anxieties arising out of the assertions by the lower caste men and the "employed" upper caste women in the public sphere. Even while evoking queer energies, the male-bonding in these films reiterated the superiority of the high caste men over the lower caste men as well as the upper caste women. Sanjeev and Venkiteswaran (2002) have discussed the interventions of the popular actor-writer-director Sreenivasan in Malayalam cinema as the attempts to raise "uneasy" questions against the Left's secular politics that remained resolutely impervious to questions of caste, by often appropriating and subverting the established conventions in cinema. Even while making himself available as an actor carrying 'visibly' subaltern physical attributes who constantly had to play the role of the denigrated, the films he

[8] See also Rowena 2010. Despite the valuable insights that the study provides, Rowena's analyses of the films of earlier periods are characterized by a tendency to examine them against the same framework that she uses to analyze the comedy films of the late 1980s and the 1990s. Thus, the securing of the structures of "casteist patriarchy" is uncomplicatedly understood as the singular motive that drives the narrative preoccupations in the social realism of the Left during the 1950s, the middle class family dramas of the 1970s and the 1980s, as well as the comedy films of the 1990s.

scripted and directed engaged directly with the unresolved and publically unacknowledged structures of caste. Radhakrishnan's (2009) study on the relationship between the Gulf economy and Malayalam cinema between the 1970s and the 1990s looks at how Gulf emerged as a significant point of reference for imagining the cultural identify of Kerala during these three decades. He delineates the distinct modes in which the 'artistic' cinema and the commercial cinema engaged with the changes that became visible in the economic and social hierarchies within the region in the context of the Gulf migration and remittances.

The period post 1970s has also witnessed attempts to invent and draw new boundaries between "art" and "commercial" cinema, as S Sanjeev (2002) has shown through a discourse analysis of the writings on cinema during this period. These writings by critics tended to construct a hierarchy between "art" and "commercial" films based on the suggestion that the latter exhibited excessive investments in "the body" (i.e., the sexualized female body) while the former would focus on "the soul". Sanjeev contends that the "middlebrow" cinema of the 1980s showed a progressive tendency to collapse these binaries in many ways. Often, the terms of reception would dramatically change depending on how a particular film has framed the excesses of the female body, as Navaneetha Mokkil (2011) has shown in her analysis of *Avalude Ravukal* (Her Nights: I V Sasi, 1978), a film that played with these binaries of the body and the soul, resulting in

its circulation in Kerala as both a semi-porn flick and later as an 'art' film. Her essay links the public anxieties over the excesses of popular cinema with the moral anxieties within the region around "sexualized" figures like the prostitute.[9] Bindu Menon (2010) has examined how some of the middlebrow films of the 1980s, especially those directed by K G George, engaged with female subjectivity, often in conversation with the "women's cinema" of the 1950s and the 1960s. Though these formulations do not offer instant frameworks with which to approach Malayalam cinema of the 1950s, they provide us hints about some of the aesthetic conventions that have been carried over from the earlier decades, and the modifications that they have undergone in the subsequent periods. Most importantly, by pointing towards the subjectivities and desires that erupted in Malayalam cinema after the 1970s, these works signal towards the questions and anxieties that were sought to be ideologically resolved, provisionally set aside, or left unaddressed in the films of earlier periods.

Thesis outline

The thesis is divided into five chapters, each trying to historicize the industrial and cultural considerations – not always contingent on the social-historical imperatives specific to the region – that governed various historical agents'

[9] Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2010) has discussed the public anxieties over the popularity of the semi-porn films starring Shakeela over the last decade. He has argued that a certain urge to protect "the family-audience" against the feared moral depreciation that the semi-porn films might cause has emerged as the most perceptible anxiety behind the attempts to regulate the circulation of these films.

engagements with cinema, and the shifting patterns in them across the period, and which reflected on the textual elements they mobilized, appropriated, subverted and at times rendered obsolete. The analysis of the spectatorial subjectivities that the textual and representational strategies in these films produced enables us to map the contestations animating the region's political-cultural scenario during the period.

Chapter I is an attempt to understand the commercial-cultural pressures within which Udaya and Merryland, the first film studios set up by Malayali entrepreneurs in Kerala, operated during the early 1950s. It also tries to offer an overview of the various stages of the development of the exhibition and distribution sectors in Kerala between the late 1920s and the 1940s, as well as the economic considerations and the cultural anxieties that facilitated the setting up of production centres within Kerala by the late 1940s. Moving beyond the impulses of analyzing the early studio films as 'regional' films, the chapter approaches them as products of *bricolage* which, seeking to address a socially mixed audience, combined a host of generic elements weaved together often along manipulated links within an overarching framework that privileged the impulses of an aesthetic of contemporaneity. This emerged as a convenient format to negotiate with the industrial and aesthetic terms set by South Indian cinema, mainly based in Madras, and the cultural demands placed on it by the socio-historical changes taking place during the 1950s. The case of *Jeevithanowka*

(K Vembu, 1951) is discussed as an instance where elements from popular mythologicals and stage performances were incorporated, appropriated and subsumed within the compulsions of the aesthetic of contemporaneity that placed much emphasis on the rationalist notions of cause and effect at the formal level and in narrative progression.

Embarking on a close textual analysis of *Neelakkuyil* (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954), Chapter II revisits the cultural interventions of the Left in the popular domain, and their specificities. In some ways, the socio-realist films adopted the studio films' strategy of combining various textual elements, thus shaping a commercial-aesthetic form(ula) that would address the masses, even while catering to many desires and anxieties of the middle class. The chapter argues that *Neelakkuyil* combines the elements of the star-cinema typical of the South Indian case, and the aesthetic traits – in its choice of the theme and the representational strategies – that one can identify in the progressive realist cinema in Hindi and Bengali during the late 1940s and the early 1950s. It appropriated the space of the cinema hall, marked by the presence of 'the masses', to give shape to an aesthetic of the 'new popular' on the one hand, and on the other, to negotiate the (high caste) middle class's position in the new nation of Malayalees *before* the mass audience of popular cinema.

The chapter also argues that if the 'nationalist' address based on a common language characterized the commercial, star cinema of the 1950s in the other south Indian states, in the case of Kerala, the Left conceived and proposed a discourse of rationality, imagined as emanating from Communism, as the uniting element of Malayali nationalism – an aspect which was to have major implications in the region's cultural realm towards the end of the decade. The Left's social imaginary constructed a new moral authority for the region based on secular, rational values perceived as emanating from communist ideals, often marginalizing and delegitimizing the energies of affects and faith. Social realism conceived the realms of rational politics and the relations between communities (mediated by the exchanges and contracts between men) as the *only* constitutive elements of 'social reality'; consequently, it marginalized and delegitimized the affects and energies of romance and sentiments, perceived as appealing mainly to women. The chapter ends by proposing that the radically commercial film industry that emerged in Malayalam by the late 1950s, facilitated by the local studios like Udaya and Merryland, commodified and addressed the subjectivity of women in various forms, offering avenues of covert gratification of their desires and anxieties. The films based on the *painkili* novels of writers like Muttathu Varkey and E J Kanam, commonly perceived as catering mainly to women readers, were to become a major presence in Malayalam cinema by the late 1950s and during the 1960s.

Chapter III examines *Newspaper Boy* (P Ramadas, 1955) and *Raricha Enna Powran* (P Bhaskaran, 1956) as the early attempts in Malayalam to mould an *artistic* practice of cinema, addressing mainly a small middle class audience segment. Discursively constituting the audience as 'universal humanitarian subjects', and constantly reiterating the belief in the audience-members' capabilities to make meaning on his/her own through the recurrent use of suggestive visual codes, were two marked features in these films. Historically, these artistic practices of cinema necessitated evolving new aesthetic registers that would be different from the textual strategies used in the social realism of the Left, even while continuing with its thematic focus on the poor. The chapter argues that the strategies of deploying the urban milieu as the narrative backdrop and using the figure of the child protagonists as a key narrative device allowed these films to focus on, and elaborate the tales of, the poor and the oppressed in ways that suit the gaze of the middle class viewer. The affective energies of melodramatic pathos were blended with the imperatives of realist representational strategies and avant-garde devices like montage in this cinema, to narrate tales of human suffering from the vantage point of the middle class's anxieties about social transformations in the context of the call for rapid industrialization in the region.

The chapter argues that while there is are strong impulses in *Rarichan Enna Powran* to *reconstruct* the urban space using studio sets, *Newspaper Boy* uses the devices of *documenting* the city. I argue that these differences in the films' relation

to the urban space are directly linked to the specific anxieties of the cultural producers regarding industrialization and the social transformation that ensues. Contrasting *Rarichan Enna Powran* with *Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu* (Nair's Dilemma: P Bhaskaran, 1958), a popular comedy film made by the same team, the chapter tries to point out the Left's alternating take on industrialization when it addressed the middle class audience, and when it addressed the masses. I argue that these contradictory tendencies in the Left's take on industrialization as arising out of the complex negotiations that the Left in Kerala had to engage in during the time with the hopes and anxieties of, on the one hand the lower caste/class majority – who also formed a major support base for the Communist Party in Kerala – and, on the other hand, the traditionally powerful sections as well as the consolidating middle class, in order to maintain its power.

In Chapter IV, I have tried to signal at the disaggregation of the Malayali nation, envisaged by the Left as composed of modern, rational subjects, by the late 1950s, in the context of *Vimochana Samaram* and other political developments. The commercial film industry in the region, spearheaded by Udaya and Merryland – the two local studios – identified the disaggregated polity, and tried to cater to various dissenting sections of the population by commodifying their desires and subjectivities. I have attempted to argue that the emergence of the small and broadly defined genres in Malayalam cinema by the late 1950s, mainly 'the women's cinema', 'the Christian/Muslim socials', and the films based on

religious myths and folktales like *vadakkan pattukal*, signify the commercial film industry's attempt to cater to the desires and anxieties of different segments of the population that began expressing their disillusionment with the model of Malayali nationalism proposed by the Left. These genres tried to cash in on the affects of faith, sentiments and romance, the energies of which were marginalized and delegitimized in the Left's cultural imagination. The Left-affiliated artists, however, responded to this political-cultural 'crisis' by trying to hold together the dissenting audience segments under the rubric of the narratives of nationalist social progress constructed around a central martyr figure. This shift in the narrative structure went along with the attempts to evolve a 'middle aesthetic' in cinema, which would incorporate the elements of popular cinema, but subordinate them to the worldviews of the middle class, nationalist spectator subject, through strategies of framing and containment. The chapter examines *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (The Prodigal Son: Ramu Kariat, 1961) and *Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi* (A New Horizon, A New World: M S Mani, 1962) – two films written by the quintessential Left writer Thoppil Bhasi – as martyr narratives of nationalist integration, proposing the 'middle aesthetic' as the ideal. The dissenting voices against the integrationist imperatives in these films were often acknowledged, but were contained for the moment in favour of the preoccupations of nationalist social progress.

Chapter V is an attempt to read *Bhargaveenilayam* (The Haunted House: A Vincent, 1964), a ghost film written by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, as an attempt to systematically articulate the disillusionment of various sections of the population against the cultural vision proposed by the Left's social realism. Firmly rejecting the secular vision of the Left that marginalized faith as well as the rationalist notions of cause and effect propagated by social realism, *Bhargaveenilayam* positioned itself in the domain of the popular, in order to strive to evolve a radically new worldview out of the affects and energies circulating in this domain. Combining the elements of horror cinema and detective stories, the film evokes the pleasures of truth-seeking, but appropriates them to construct a vision of life that, on the one hand resists the rationalist notions of empiricism, and on the other, revivifies and retrieves the energies of faith, sentiment and romance as focal points around which social transformation can be imagined.

Chapter I

'Regional' Cinema or Products of *Bricolage*?
An Introduction to Malayalam Studio Films of the Early 1950s

The first and foremost difficulty that researchers of early cinema in a regional industry like Malayalam face is the unavailability of films made before the 1950s for viewing. In a way, this scenario enables us to move away from the dominant text-determined analyses of a modern, globally-circulating, medium like cinema and to bring to the fore the industrial-cultural factors – not always contingent on the ideological and territorial parameters of the nation or a particular region – that determined the commercial production of films in a region like Kerala. This paper tries to propose a framework of understanding the aesthetic traits of the studio films of the late 1940s in Malayalam, by foregrounding the commercial considerations of the distribution and exhibition sectors, already in operation in the region since the late 1920s, with which the first studios in Kerala had to negotiate to cull out a space for their own films.

The dominant tendency in the thin strand of academic writings on early Malayalam cinema is to consider the early filmmaking initiatives as moments of rupture beginning to constitute an autonomous field of 'regional cinema', wherein the socio-political imperatives of the region influence and directly reflect

on the local attempts to make films. This framework remains insensitive to the dynamics of global cultural flow and the network of production and circulation stretching beyond the regional and national boundaries – factors that shaped the nature of early cinema across the world (See Bhaumik 2008; Vasudevan 2010a). In the regions that constitute the present administrative unit of Kerala [1], films made in other languages, and in provincial production centers outside of Madras, were immensely popular since the 1920s. The distribution and exhibition sectors in the region depended on these production centers outside for a steady stream of films to sustain them, at least until the late 1950s. The first studios in Kerala, set up in the late 1940s, had to engage with this wide commercial network of production and circulation as well as other popular entertainment forms like drama – an aspect that crucially determined the dominant aesthetic form of the films they made. That the filmmakers of this period succeeded to a large extent in responding to the commercial and cultural considerations of a global circulation network is evident from the fact that a good number of the films made in Malayalam during the late 1940s and the early 1950s collected most of their revenues from screenings (of their re-made/dubbed versions) in other South Indian regions as well as the markets in Sri Lanka and South East Asian regions like Malaysia and Singapore. Rather than extolling the offshore reach of some of the early Malayalam films, the attempt here was to

[1] The linguistic state of Kerala came into existence only in 1956. The state was formed, during the linguistic reorganization of states in India, out of a majority of Malayalam-speaking areas of two princely states, namely, Travancore and Cochin, and the Malabar area of Madras Presidency, in southwest India.

foreground the need to understand the operations of the early film industry in Malayalam within the terms and constraints set by the wider networks of production and circulation, especially the industrial and aesthetic terms set by the production base in Madras. Broadly, the paper is an effort to reinsert the early history of Malayalam cinema into the larger field of South Indian cinema of the period, so that the specificities of the former emerge in relation to the latter, not independent of it.

In the first part of this chapter, I intend to posit a few tentative formulations about the political economy of the film business in Kerala between the 1930s and the 1950s, by foregrounding the economic/industrial conditions of the region in which the distribution-exhibition sectors operated during the time. These formulations help us situate the industrial-cultural considerations that determined the aesthetics and the textual form of early films produced by the local studios by the late 1940s and the early 1950s. For the information required for constructing this historical account, I have depended on archival sources like newspaper reports and advertisements, memoirs of the early entrepreneurs in the film industry, autobiographies, official records and reports and historical accounts about cinema in other regions of the South India. I have also depended on the CD, *Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema* (2003), brought out by Chalachitra Academy, Thiruvananthapuram, for the information on various aspects about the early years of the distribution-exhibition sectors in the region.

The reliability and authenticity of the information in this source is questionable, and it is indeed risky to rely on them; the dates and names used in this source need to be verified by thorough research. Nevertheless, my attempt here is to put together as much useful information about the ownership patterns in various sectors of the film business/industry between the 1930s and the 1950s, the modes of their operation and their negotiations with the industrial-cultural conditions that prevailed in the region during the time.

The industrial structure and cinema in the region: 1920s – 1930s

In India, after the advent of the talkies, film production, which was scattered in various urban centers, gradually became concentrated in metros like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras – the centers of India's industrial activities during the time – where an industrial working class, even though nothing compared to India's total labor force, had already formed.[2] While permanent theatres were set up in these cities in the early 1910s or before, travelling cinema catered to the rest of the country. Most of these cinema houses, especially the ones located outside the main urban centers, preferred screening foreign films since Indian films were costly to acquire and could not guarantee a sufficiently large audience to recover the huge hiring and transport costs (Vitali, 2008: 3-6). In Madras, the early permanent cinema houses were set up by western entrepreneurs, initially to cater

[2] In South India, the early filmmaking centres were Madras, Vellore, Nagercoil, Salem, Coimbatore and Mysore. See Baskaran, 2009, for a history of early South Indian cinema.

to the small audiences of the Europeans and elite Indians (Hughes, 2000; Baskaran, 2009: 46). Against this scenario, the following section tries to map the socio-economic conditions in which a film business, dependent predominantly on travelling cinemas exhibiting Tamil, Hindi and foreign films, operated in Kerala until the 1950s. Many of these conditions enabled Tamil studios and a number of Tamil distribution companies, mostly owned by Tamil Brahmins – an influential caste group that enjoyed government patronage in the Travancore princely state (Jeffrey 1975, Chapter 4) – to dominate the film business in the region.

In Kerala, a number of factors contributed to the establishment and extension of a cash economy in Travancore society by the mid-nineteenth century. Robin Jeffrey (1975) identifies some of these factors as the land reform law enacted by the Travancore government in 1865 granting full ownership rights to the holders of the 200,000 acres of government *pāttam* land, enabling many landlords to sell their land if they wished to do so; the creation of the Public Works Department, which, apart from encouraging trade and entrepreneurship, offered the slave castes an alternative form of employment; the emergence of trading activities, mostly by non-Malayali Brahmins, Muslims and Syrian Christians; and the expansion of the plantation sector (Jeffrey, 1975: 79-92). However, as studies suggest, a predominantly agro-economic structure prevailed in the regions that constitute the present Kerala, especially the princely state of Travancore, during

the first two decades of the twentieth century. There were hardly any (capital-intensive) modern industries. Most of the economic activities were centred on plantation agriculture and agro-processing industries. Also, there was a near absence of an indigenous entrepreneurial class. European capital maintained a complete dominance and hegemony over these sectors, and the majority of the labour force was engaged in these traditional sectors. Raman Mahadevan, in his study on the history of industrial development in the princely state of Travancore, observes:

> The industrial structure of the region continued, at least till the early forties, to be characterized by the dominance of the export-oriented plantation and agro-processing industries. […] [A]s a percentage of the value of total exports, coconut and its products, the plantation crops, coffee, tea and rubber together with other hill produce, accounted for 80.4 per cent in 1870-1, 80.5 per cent in 1919-20, 82.1 per cent in 1938-9 and 85.5 per cent in 1945-6. […] Even as late as 1940-1, the work-force in plantations and the agro-processing industries accounted for over 84 per cent of the total work force in organized industries. The phenomenal growth of the cashew industry in the forties further strengthened the work-force in the traditional sector. (Mahadevan, 1991: 160-62)

The wages for the work force in the traditional sectors remained considerably low, compared to the wages in other parts of the country. The abysmally low wage rates was one of the major factors that, on the one hand, attracted investment from other parts of the country in the region before the 1940s in these

traditional sectors, and on the other, resulted in the emergence of a strong trade union movement in this sector.[3] This scenario had direct implications for the film industry as well. In fact, a committee assigned to look into the living conditions of labourers in the coir manufacturing industry reports that even as late as in 1952, many of the respondents had not been able to watch a cinema for years due to low wages and awful living standards.[4]

The agriculture-based industrial economy in Travancore, with the overall predominance of foreign capital, gradually began to change by the 1930s. The Depression resulted in severe fall in the prices of agricultural products[5]; more people began leaving agriculture and moving to urban areas; the princely state adopted an industrial policy encouraging investment in industries as a solution to issues like growing unemployment (see Pillai & Shanta, 1997; Isaac & Tharakan, 1986; Mahadevan, 1991). The falling prices of agricultural products

[3] See Pillai & Shanta, 1997. The Report on the Annual Survey of Industries, Kerala, 1962, says that the annual wage rate per person employed in Industries in Kerala is Rs.977 as against Rs.1905 in Madras and Rs.1922 for all of India. The report says, though the population of Kerala is 3.8 per cent of the all India population, the productive capital employed in major industrial units in Kerala is only 1.6 per cent of that of all India. At the same time the employment in these units in the state is about 4 per cent of the total employment in the units in India as a whole. The report says most of the industries in this state were traditional industries using outmoded technology and in which the wages are comparatively low. (The Report on the Annual Survey of Industries, Kerala, 1962: 7-8).

[4] Travancore-Cochin Minimum Wages Committee for the Manufacture of Coir Report, 1952: 15. Also see Lindberg (2001) for the labour conditions in the cashew nut industry, the workforce in which represented from thirty to fifty per cent of the formal factory workforce in Kerala since the mid-1920s.

[5] As a percentage of value of total exports, coconuts and its products, plantation crops (coffee, tea and rubber) together with other hill produce accounted for more than 80 per cent between 1870 and 1945. (Pillai & Shanta 1997: 10)

resulted in the transfer of capital from agricultural and plantation sectors to other industries, though at a marginal rate. The census recorded an increase of 40.4 per cent in the number of persons engaged in organised industries from 103,490 in 1931 to 145,291 in 1941.[6] A nascent entrepreneurial class, mainly from within sections of the Ezhava and Syrian Christian community, emerged during this time, even though the growth of this class tended to be somewhat tardy. To compensate for the sluggish entrepreneurial response of the local business groups, the princely state sought to actively intervene in promoting industries, often playing the role of an entrepreneur. This scenario, however, did not result in any significant spurt in industrial investment which occurred only in the 1940s (Mahadevan, 1991: 163). Nevertheless, there was a growing migration to the employment generated by the setting up of a few industries and a number of cottage industries in textiles, cashew nut processing, tile making, coir making, etc, which heavily depended on cheap labor. In short, three points need to be emphasized: (*a*) agriculture and related sectors reached a level where it could not absorb capital and work force anymore, (*b*) the units of traditional and cottage industries increased, even though the prevailing conditions did not result in the setting up of modern industries in any significant way, (*c*) these circumstances accelerated the commercialization and urbanization process and the emergence of a work force engaged in organized industries.

[6] Census of India, 1941: Travancore. The Census also reports that the population of the city and the population of the towns have both increased by 33.7 per cent, while smaller towns registered an increase between 16 per cent and 20 per cent.

Early instances of indigenous investments in film industry

During this period, one of the sectors that the emerging entrepreneurial class invested in seems to be the film business, especially in setting up exhibition and distribution networks.[7] Tamil capital had a significant presence in these sectors. The monopoly of European capital in almost all other sectors of the economy and the absence of other significant industrial areas to venture into could have propelled investments in speculative enterprises like film industry. In addition, cinema's modern attributes could also have been a major factor.

The investments in various sectors of film business were marked by their speculative and rotating nature, and in most cases, the prospect of good returns was not the motivation behind them. Talking about his foray into the field of art in the late 1920s, P J Cheriyan, who made *Nirmala* (P V Krishna Iyer, 1947), one of the early talkies in Malayalam, says in his memoirs: "It was a risky decision to leave the traditional agricultural occupation and venture into the art sector. The field of art did not seem to be offering the prospects of a prosperous life at all" (Cheriyan, 1964: 11). Leaving his father's business of edible oil trade, Cheriyan set up a photography studio (Royal Studio) at Ernakulam in 1927, and later started a professional drama company named 'Royal Cinema and Dramatic Company' in 1929. Similarly, N X George, who was from the rubber trade,

[7] See also Srinivas (2010) for an account on the migration of agricultural capital based in rural Andhra regions to the film industry based in Madras during the post-Depression period.

migrated to film distribution by setting up Geo Pictures in the late 1930s, and, despite running into huge losses initially, continued in the sector (N G John, 2011a). These accounts points perhaps to the lack of other avenues into which capital from the stagnant agricultural and related sectors could move.

Exhibition and distribution sectors

The first distribution company in Kerala was started in 1928 by Nenmara Lakshmana Iyer to distribute films made in other parts of British India, especially Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. Lakshmana Iyer also set up temporary exhibition centers at Kochi, Ernakulam and Alleppey, under the name Imperial Talkies. The exhibitors and distributors depended mainly on Madras, Bombay and Calcutta for a regular supply of films, along with imported films mainly from America and Britain, and also from Germany, Italy and France. Theatres had to change films regularly, most often every two weeks and sometimes every three days (see Johnny & Venugopal, 2009: 20; Baskaran, 2009).

The exhibition-distribution sectors started expanding from the mid-1930s, with a considerably good number of films from across the world in circulation in the region. Between September, 1936, and May, 1937, the Censor Board examined 240 films (*Nasrani Deepika*, 22 May, 1937). The region's first permanent cinema houses were set up in the late 1920s and 1930s. The exhibition sector mainly

consisted of travelling and temporary cinemas until the 1950s. According to a newspaper report, 209 exhibition centers operated across Kerala by August 1950 – 125 in Travancore, 43 in Cochin and 41 in Malabar. Of this, only around 10 were permanent theatres. The license granted to the temporary and semi-temporary exhibition centers had expired by 1950. The report mentions that the Thiru-Cochin Film Chamber of Commerce, formed on August 7, 1950, appealed to the government for granting the temporary exhibition centers permission to continue in operation (*Malayala Manorama,* 8 August, 1950).[8]

The memoirs of K V Koshy, 'the first Malayali distributor', provides us with a glimpse into the scenario that prevailed during the 1930s and the 1940s. The films that circulated in Kerala were mostly damaged copies of Tamil, Telugu and Hindi films, after their screenings across various regions for months. The distributors would procure films from companies based mainly in Madras, Salem, Bangalore or Bombay by paying a fixed amount (around Rs.700 in the 1930s, as per Koshy's account). The revenue that these films could generate from screenings across Kerala was considered just a bonus by the film production companies (Koshy, 1968: 12-3; 23-4) until the first studios set up in Kerala began

[8] The report does not give any indications as to who owned these exhibition centres. However, it can be safely assumed that a good number of these must have been owned by non-Malayalees, especially Tamil Brahmins who were a major presence in the distribution and exhibition sectors in Kerala since the late 1920s. Some of the early permanent exhibition centres owned by Tamil Brahmins in the region are: Ramavarma Theatre, Thrissur (1929) of T A Naganatha Iyer; Menaka Theatre, Eranakulam (1938) of T D Narayana Iyer; Central Theatre, Thripunithura (1938) of S Suryanarayana Iyer; and Sreekrishna Talkies, Thodupuzha (1938) of N K Krishna Iyer. ("Initial Years": *Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema,* 2003).

making films in considerable numbers by the early 1950s. The theatres would procure films from the distributors for a few days and try to collect as much revenue as possible by conducting more screenings per day than were agreed and allowed,[9] and also by screening the films at more than one venue. Until at least the late 1950s, the distributors in Travancore used to procure the rights of Tamil films as soon as their production began,[10] indicating their popularity and the shortage of films in circulation in the region. The travelling and temporary cinemas dominated the scene, often competing with other entertainment forms like popular dramas, both Tamil and Malayalam.

The Arrival of sound

In 1932, when *Marthandavarma,* a silent film on a Travancorean theme was released, Tamil cinema had already moved to the era of talkies. The arrival of sound gave the Tamil industry an upper hand over the popular and cheaply available foreign films. Even though the first sound studio in South India (Srinivasa Cinetone, Madras) was set up only in 1934, the Tamil film industry began appropriating the technology for consolidating the linguistic market much before. The first sound film in Tamil-Telugu was made in 1931 (*Kalidas;* H M

[9] For example, *Nasrani Deepika*, on 13 January, 1939, reports that the municipality authorities have warned three theatres, conducting shows till early morning in Mattanchery [near the present Kochi], not to conduct screenings after midnight.

[10] The editorial in *Nasrani Deepika*, December 29, 1948, says that the setting up of studios in Kerala is the only way to avoid this scenario of the distributors and exhibitors in Kerala procuring unfinished or even just-announced Tamil films without having any idea about how the film would turn out to be.

Reddy, 1931). Producers based in Madras went to studios in Bombay, Calcutta and Kolhapur, where facilities for making sound films were available, and made talkies in Tamil and other South Indian languages in considerably large numbers. In 1935, after sound studios were set up in Madras, 35 talkies were made; and more than 240 films were made in the first decade of Tamil talkies (1931-1941). Buoyed by this, by 1936, the number of cinema houses in the Presidency increased to 225, of which 12 were in the city of Madras, and about a hundred were touring cinemas (in contrast to 46 permanent houses and 12 touring talkies operating across the Presidency by 1927) (Baskaran, 2009: 49-50).

Silent films continued to be screened in Kerala at least until the early 1940s. Though we do not have much information about when cinema houses in Kerala began to introduce the sound system, it seems safe to assume that they started screening talkies as early as this trend emerged in other parts of South India, and that Tamil talkies were popular in the regions of Kerala, mythologicals being a prominent genre among them.[11] However, the narrow size of the linguistic market that a Malayalam talkie could possibly cater to seems to have initially dissuaded many from the business. Koshy notes that filmmakers in Madras

[11] In 1952, a commentator, writing about the popularity of Tamil talkies in Kerala, wrote: "The business of selling mythological films is more prominent in North India. In Hollywood, the birthplace of cinema, there is no market for gods. In South India, Tamilians seem to excel in this. *In fact, film viewers [in Kerala], for a long time, have been under the impression that Tamil is the mother tongue of gods!* However, some Malayalees have now started importing gods from Tamil cinema [into Malayalam cinema] in order to end the former's monopoly over gods. Recently, one of my friends, after watching a Malayalam mythological film, said: 'Finally, Lord Siva spoke in Malayalam!'" (P A Seythu Mohammed, 'Our Cinema', in *Vidyabhivardhini*, January 1952; emphasis added.)

thought that making a film in Malayalam would not be commercially viable "because Kerala is not even 1/5 of the size of Tamil Nadu" (Koshy 1968: 46). The economic conditions following the Great Depression and the Second World War further delayed the emergence of the Malayalam talkie era. In short, it took a while for the emergence of initiatives to capitalize on the sound technology and consolidate the linguistic market in Malayalam-speaking regions, the way the industry in Madras appropriated it to seize the linguistic markets in the south from foreign films.

Nevertheless, a number of local entrepreneurs as well as some of the production bases far from Madras were motivated by the advent of sound to explore the commercial prospects of talkies in Kerala. The first talkie in Malayalam, *Balan* (S Notani, 1938), was produced by T R Sundaram who owned Modern Theatres, Salem, which showed a distinct interest in the Kerala market.[12] Alleppey Vincent, who was instrumental in the setting up of the first studios in Kerala, acted in the film and worked as its production executive. The production of the film was started by collecting Rs 25,000 from the exhibitors beforehand. Advertised as the 'first Malayalam social', the film did commercially well. (Gopalakrishnan 2004).

[12] Though T R Sundaram of Modern Theatres, Salem, produced only three films in Malayalam, its interventions in the Kerala market are noteworthy. Apart from *Balan*, he produced and directed the first full length colour film in Malayalam (*Kandam Becha Kottu*, 1961) which was also one of the first Muslim socials in the language. Established in 1936, Modern Theatres became a major banner in South Indian cinema, and also produced seven films in Sinhalese.

A number of unsuccessful attempts at making films also marked this period. There was an attempt to make a film based on *Bhootharayar*, a novel by Appan Thampuran. The film, which was to be directed by S Notani, could not be completed (Vijayakrishnan, 1987: 47). Similarly, a Tamil company had plans to make a Malayalam talkie titled *Prema Vaichithryam* in 1938, which was to be based on a play by a drama troupe in Alleppey (*Mathrubhoomi*, 13 January, 1938). A report in *Malayala Manorama* on 29 December, 1938, said that a film production company named Kairali Talkies would soon be registered at Palakkad. Similarly, a society named 'Kerala Fine Art Society' was set up in Madras to make films in Malayalam, and to encourage Kerala's art forms like Kathakali and Kalaripayattu (*Mathrubhoomi*, 1 November, 1939). Nevertheless, only two more films – *Jnanambika* (S Notani, 1940), and *Prahlada* (K Subrahmaniam, 1941) – were made in Malayalam until 1947, as the industry in South India was hit by the acute shortage of raw stock due to the Second World War for almost a decade.

The late 1930s and the early 1940s also witnessed the emergence of a number of initiatives which were to act as catalysts in the evolution of a commercial film industry in the region after the War, when circumstances became more conducive. In 1938, K V Koshy set up his film distribution company, Filmco. This was closely followed by other initiatives of a similar kind. N X George started the distribution company Geo Pictures at Kottayam in 1939, which later became a major production and distribution banner. Swami Films, another major

distribution firm, owned by K S Akhileswara Aiyar, was set up in 1939. ("The Distribution Companies", *Nana*, January 1974). Iyer later produced films like *Yachakan* (R Velappan Nair, 1951) and *Manasakshi* (G Vishwanath, 1954). He was also instrumental in the setting up of the All Travancore Cinema Association at Kottayam in 1947. T E Vasudevan, who was to become a major producer in the 1950s, started his distribution company, Associated Pictures, in 1940. Associated Pictures entered film production in the 1950s and made films like *Amma* (K Vembu, 1952), *Ashadeepam* (G R Rao, 1953), *Snehaseema* (S S Rajan, 1954), *Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu* (P Bhaskaran, 1958), *Jnanasundari* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1961), *Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi* (M S Mani, 1962), etc. P Subrahmaniam, who set up Merryland Studio and his production banner Neela by the late 1940s, made his first film *Prahlada* in 1941, which was also the first mythological in Malayalam.[13] In the same year, Kunchacko, along with Alleppey Vincent and others, founded a permanent production house named Udaya Pictures, which in 1948 became Udaya Studio at Alleppey – the first studio in Kerala with sound recording facilities.

The post-war economy and the context of linguistic nationalism

By the late 1940s, with the end of the War, and in the context of an industrial buoyancy especially in the Travancore princely state (Mahadevan 1991), the film

[13] P Subrahmaniam began his career as an exhibitor by setting up New Theatre and Chitra Theatre at Thiruvananthapuram in 1930.

industry in the region witnessed a significant spurt in initiatives in all sectors, including production and the setting up of studios. This enthusiasm was also nurtured by a bourgeoning linguistic nationalist discourse. Around 70 films were produced in Malayalam during the decade – a considerable increase compared to the number of films made till then. This was the result of the increased investments in setting up studios, distribution firms and new cinema halls, together with the entry of some of the distribution banners – especially those owned by K V Koshy, T E Vasudevan and Akhileswara Iyer – into film production. The first two films from Udaya Studio, set up by Kunchacko at Alleppey in 1947, were released in 1949 and 1950 (*Vellinakshathram,* Felix J H Bais*,* 1949; and *Nallathanka,* P V Krishna Iyer, 1950). K V Koshy tied up with Kunchakko and launched their banner K & K Productions in 1949. In 1951, P Subrahmaniam, who produced *Prahlada*, set up Merryland Studio in Thiruvananthapuram in 1951 by investing around Rs 10 lakhs.[14] His production banner 'Neela' released its first film *Athmasakhi* (G R Rao) in 1952. Neela simultaneously made a Tamil version of the film also, named *Priyasakhi*.

A number of other important initiatives also emerged during the time. V Ramakrishna Iyer, one of the distributors of the 40s, entered production and made films like *Vanamala* (G Vishwanath, 1951) and *Premalekha* (M K Mani, 1952), along with S. A. Narayanan, who set up his company in Bangalore to distribute

[14] Interview with S Kumar (son of P Subrahmaniam); 8 November, 2010.

American films. In 1949, A T Abraham set up his distribution banner 'Cochin Pictures', and later, in 1950, started the distribution firm, Prabhat Films, along with P V Varghese. He also set up temporary cinema halls in central Kerala. Johnson M A started a distribution company called Jaya Films in the early 1950s and opened cinema halls in Kochi. In 1952, T K Pareekkutty, who later produced a number of socialist realist films during the 1950s and the 1960s, set up his distribution outfit 'Chandrathara' ("Initial Years": *Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema* 2003).

The changed economic-cultural conditions seem to have enabled the local studios and Malayali entrepreneurs to take on the powerful Tamil producers and distributors. K V Koshy says he "felt it was much more viable to make films on our own by spending around Rs 1-1.5 lakhs, rather than acquire Tamil films for amounts like Rs 2 lakhs, and then run into losses." (1968: 62) The strategy was obviously to make films at low costs – often ranging between Rs 1 lakh and Rs 3 lakhs – by keeping in mind the possibilities of remaking or dubbing them into other languages. Udaya's *Nallathanka* was made at the cost of around Rs 1 lakh, and Neela's *Athmasakhi* with Rs 2.5 lakhs.[15] This was the time when a big budget Tamil film would spend up to, or more than, Rs 20 lakhs for its production. The industry operated mainly based on a rotating capital base. S Kumar, son of P Subrahmaniam, said in an interview that none of the producers of the time had

[15] Interview with S Kumar

enough money with them to spend lavishly, or make more than one film at a time. The producers were not concerned as much about making huge returns from their films as about ensuring moderate revenues from the screenings to cover their expenses, and re-investing the money in producing new films on a rotational basis.

Appropriating the linguistic nationalist discourse

As the initiatives commercially exploiting the prospects in cinema gained momentum, simultaneously, a growing culture of writing about the medium, mainly through newspapers and periodicals, also emerged. K V Koshy, after setting up his distribution firm, immediately launched a film magazine called *Cinema* in 1939 (Koshy 1968: 40-42). Similarly, the *Malayala Manorama* announced a dedicated feature page for news and reports about cinema in the same year (*Malayala Manorama*, 7 May, 1939). While Koshy's intention was, among other things, to provide the necessary information regarding new releases to the exhibitors and to highlight the problems faced by those who are in the industry, especially the exhibitors, *Malayala Manorama* stated its purpose as to educate the masses about cinema. The newspaper wrote:

> We have not attempted to provide necessary information to the masses about films. In English, as well as in some other Indian languages, there are writings about cinema that provide information about cinema to

> audiences. But similar initiatives have not yet been taken in Malayalam. This is one step towards that goal. (*Malayala Manorama*, 7 May, 1939)

As was the case in most other parts of India, one major concern raised by the commentators was the evil influence that cinema could have on certain sections of people. Cinema was figuratively marked as the favourite medium of the plebian masses with poor tastes, and cinema halls as contaminating spaces.[16] At the same time, cinema's ability to capture 'social reality' and its positive potentials as a medium, 'if utilized properly', was unambiguously acknowledged. Consider these comments for example. The first one is by K Ramakrishna Pillai, a cultural critic, about the power of cinema and its implications for theatre:

> The world is changing very fast. The desire for a new world order can be seen everywhere. It is cinema, rather than plays, that is more useful for dissemination of ideas needed for such a change. Plays cannot compete with cinema in the latter's ability to capture the social reality. ('Naalathe Naadakam', *Nasrani Deepika*, 10 January, 1941)

The second one is from a 'letter to the editor' in *Mathrubhoomi*:

> Film-going has become part of the routine for city dwellers. [...] The travelling cinema has started reaching even the remotest places. No other art form has touched human lives so profoundly, and influenced human

[16] See also Bindu Menon (2005) for an elaborate account on the nature of debates about exhibition halls in Travancore during the early 20th century. She points out that the fears about cinema halls as public spaces accessible for people across castes generated various anxieties and influenced the governmental regulations about exhibition halls.

> emotions so deeply. […] While cinema is being used in Russia for the betterment of human lives, in our country, it is being misused for invoking animal instincts. […] Our cinema halls have the character of brothels and the attraction of toddy shops. There will be dance sequences just for fun and vulgar scenes in the name of comedy, even though they don't have any relevance to the story. Most of them are mythologicals. What would the audience feel when they see the sight of our supposedly most venerated mythological heroes running helter-skelter to get mates like massive stud bulls? (*Mathrubhoomi*, 21 December, 1937)

The letter indicates some recurring features in writings about cinema during the time: (*a*) it marks cinema and the cinema hall as a contaminating medium / space (*b*) by comparing cinema halls to brothels and toddy shops, the letter indicates an (illicit) desire for cinema (it may be noted that the writer uses the word 'attraction' – *ākarshanam* – in this context) as well as a disavowal of it, (*c*) it points towards a growing disapproval of mythological films.

These anxieties and responses from the cultural elites in Kerala naturally took the form of contempt for Tamil films, since Tamil mythologicals and musicals were popular in the region. These commentaries attributed certain cultural sophistication to the 'Malayalees', as against the 'uneducated' Tamilians who produce the 'morally contaminating' films and 'dump them on Malayalees' for commercial exploitation. Announcing the beginning of a film feature page, *Malayala Manorama*, wrote in 1939:

> Unfortunately, in Kerala, Tamil films are more popular. These Tamil films cannot be compared to Hindi and Telugu films, and not least to English films. How come such films gained popularity among us? *The reason cannot be the lack of aesthetic sense among Malayalees, who are proud of being superior in their educational and cultural standards as well as having better aesthetic sense than people in any parts of India,* a fact even foreigners have approved of. The reason could be the similarities between the two languages. We [Malayalees] can easily follow Tamil. This could be the reason why we [Malayalees] often decide to watch these dreadful [Tamil] movies by spending our precious time and money for the sake of some cheap entertainment. (*Malayala Manorama,* 7 May, 1939; emphasis added)

In such writings, Tamil cinema and Tamilians emerged as the cultural 'other' of the 'culturally sophisticated' *Malayalees as a whole*. One of the objections against Tamil films was that they contained sexual obscenity, like kissing scenes. Production of films within the region, by indigenous artists, set in the region's context, was proposed as the solution. Setting up studios in Kerala and regular production of Malayalam films, it was suggested, would enable the entrepreneurs and filmmakers in Kerala to grab the market from Tamil films and distributors, which in turn would liberate the local viewers from the 'morally degrading' Tamil films. *Nasrani Deepika*, in its editorial on 13 September, 1949, wrote:

> The [distribution] companies in Kerala concentrate only on securing the rights of Tamil films, and the exhibitors here focus only on their business. In short, profit is the only motive for those engaged in film business in

> Kerala. However, some [Malayalees] have started making Malayalam films with the help of the studios outside Kerala. The main reasons behind the failure of Malayalam films are the lack of capital inflow and the lack of cooperation of the experts and the experienced people in the industry. […] *It is important that we make good films in Malayalam. It is also important that we make them within our region. The first aspect is related to supporting our own aesthetics and culture through films, and the second is related to the economic aspect.* (Emphasis added)

Moreover, the proponents of Aikya Keralam explicitly declared their patronage for a regional cinema and local production base. Pallathu Raman, a renowned poet, talking at a meeting of Sahithya Parishad, Kannur, in the context of the campaigns for Aikya Keralam, highlighted the need for setting up a production base in the region to prevent Tamil industry from commercially exploiting the Kerala market:

> The [Tamil] film industry is an institution that comes like flood waters and steals money from the pockets of Malayalees. Cinema is well suited for the promotion of music and literature. Fire can be used to burn down a house, but also to cook food. Similarly, cinema also has two aspects. Cinema should propagate moral values. Don't we [Malayalees] have beauty, culture, music, and women who are experts in dance and other arts, in our land? (*Malayala Manorama*, 4 May, 1948)

The cultural elite's contempt for Tamil cinema became a useful marketing strategy for the early filmmakers in Malayalam, who tried to cash in on the cultural pride in Malayalam and the native land. This political context enabled

the filmmakers to adopt most of the popular elements deployed in Tamil cinema, make them available in a cheap format and still claim distinctiveness from popular Tamil films. Udaya's first film *Vellinakshatram* was advertised as "the Malayalam film, made by Malayalees at a studio set up by Malayalees, in the Malayali land" (*Nasrani Deepika*, 10 February, 1949). The case of *Nallathanka*, Udaya's second film, is an interesting case indicating the dependence of the bourgeoning industry in Kerala on Tamil cinema for content. The film was based on a story which was made into film thrice in Tamil already with almost even the same name – *Nallathankal*. The Tamil versions were popular in Kerala and this was precisely the reason the filmmakers chose the same story when they were looking for a theme to make a Malayalam film on (Koshy 1968: 85-6). Thus, while freely adopting from the visual registers and thematic content widely employed in popular Tamil films, the producers were indeed resting their hopes on the cultural elite's promise of endorsement and patronage for the local industry. Whenever the writing cultural elites went back on their promise of support, the industry circles retorted sharply. For example, *Nallathanka* was indeed criticized for being a poor adaptation of a worn-out theme in Tamil films and dramas. Replying to such criticisms, Annamma Kunchacko, wife of Kunchacko, wrote that such "unfair" criticisms were the reasons for the sad plight of Malayalam film industry (*Nasrani Deepika*, 9 January, 1950). Besides, the studios used advertising strategies seeking to distance their films from the popular Tamil films in order to appeal to the cultural elites, mainly by the claim that their films

were "suitable for family viewing".[17] Another promotional strategy to appeal to the elites was to associate the films with personalities holding respectable positions. An advertisement of Udaya's *Nallathanka* claimed:

> The screening of *Nallathanka* at Madras Star Talkies will begin in the presence of Madras Mayor Dr. P V Cheriyan. Also playing at Bombay (Dadar), Ootty, Salem, Nagercoil, Madurai and Pudukkotta. (*Nasrani Deepika*, 15 April, 1950)

Udaya also arranged special screenings of their first films and managed to get famous personalities and politicians to write about their experience.[18] Meanwhile, the Tamil Nadu-based studios tried to retain their Kerala market by including songs and reels of comedy scenes in Malayalam.[19] Some of them started releasing their films in multiple theatres in one area.[20] Tamil films started flaunting their lavish spending, thus promising more entertainment and spectacle, as a marketing strategy to counter the 'family-friendly' claims of Malayalam films. For example, advertisements of *Krishnabhakthi* (1949), a Tamil

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[17] For example, *Vellinakshatram* (1949), Udaya's first film, was advertised as a "Malayalam film that can be watched along with your family members". (*Nasrani Deepika*, 10 February, 1949).

[18] After watching the premiere of *Vellinakshathram*, C Kesavan, State Congress President, wrote:

> I was a bit skeptical when I began watching this film, as I remembered the dismal failures of the Malayalam films made in non-native studios so far. But this time, two hours passed in 'filmy' speed, and I realized it only when the film got over. […] It is suitable for family viewing. (*Nasrani Deepika*, 1 January, 1949)

[19] For example, the Tamil film *Parasuraman* included three reels of comedy scenes in Malayalam, and Gemini Pictures included Malayalam songs in one of their films (Koshy 1968: 50).

[20] The Tamil mythological *Krishnabhakthi* (1949), a big budget film, seems to be the first film to have been released in multiple theatres in a town simultaneously in Kerala, according to a report in *Nasrani Deepika,* 20 June, 1949.

mythological, capitalized on the claim that the film was made at a budget of Rs 20 lakhs (*Nasrani Deepika,* 1 June, 1949; *Malayala Manorama*, 25 May, 1949). An advertisement of the Tamil film *Vijayakumari* flaunted its scenic locations, sets and dance sequences (*Nasrani Deepika*, 8 February, 1950).

Until at least the late 1950s, the distribution and exhibition sectors in the region were heavily dependent on the Madras-based industry for a steady supply of films even when the production of films in Malayalam increased gradually. Hence, far from taking an anti-Madras position, the distribution-exhibition sectors deployed similar strategies used by the studios in Kerala to remarket Tamil films (see also Figure i.1). Moreover, the producers of the early talkies in Malayalam depend heavily on revenues from screenings of their films in non-Malayalam speaking regions. Many of the early Malayalam films generated most of its revenues from screenings in Tamil and Andhra regions as well as in countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Sri Lanka (N G John, 2011b). Udaya and Merryland studios made films at phenomenally low costs, at regular intervals, and keeping in mind the possibilities of simultaneously remaking them into other languages, targeting a larger South Indian audience. These conditions placed the commercial film industry that emerged in Kerala by the late 1940s firmly within the economic and cultural structures of South Indian cinema. The challenge before the first studios was to mould an aesthetic that can address a socially mixed audience by drawing on the already popular visual registers and

generic elements, and capitalizing on the tenuous promises of patronage and endorsement offered by the cultural elites in the wake of linguistic nationalism.

Figure i.1: Advertisement of the Tamil film *Jnanasundari* inserted by Geo Pictures, Kottayam, proclaiming in English that the film is suitable for a family audience. (*Nasrani Deepika*, 8 November, 1948). **Source:** Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi.

Negotiating with the middle class and the bureaucracy

The available accounts about the nascent film industry in Kerala provides interesting information about how the industry sought to achieve economic stability by negotiating with the middle class, bureaucracy and pre-industrial forces, often by seeking patronage. The history of the Censorship Board in Travancore is an example of how the industry itself took initiatives to constitute legal procedures like censorship in order to ensure economic stability and

unpredictable hassles that the distributors and exhibitors in Kerala often had to face.

Distributor N G John's account of the industry's nature during the 1930s and 1940s offers some insight into this history. Just before launching his film distribution firm Geo Pictures in the late 1930s, N X George, the writer's father, had tried his hands at securing the distribution rights of Tamil films and distributing them in Kerala. One such film, *Dayaalan*, produced by T R Sundaram of Modern Theatres, Salem, ran into trouble after its commercially successful screenings at Thiruvananthapuram and Nagercoil for the initial few days. The government officials confiscated the film on the fourth day of its release. Apparently, the then Diwan of the Princely State of Travancore, C P Ramaswamy Iyer, was displeased with the content of the film – a story of revenge by a prince in a mythical kingdom against the scheming and cruel minister who secured the throne after imprisoning the King. The prince kills the minister, restores the King, and declares the country as "belonging to the people". The Diwan recognized the political undertones and confiscated the film, the distribution rights of which were secured for a considerably high amount. P Subrahmaniam, owner of New Theatre, Thiruvananthapuram, where the film was being screened, found a solution for the standoff. He approached Diwan C P Ramaswamy Iyer's private secretary, and it was decided that a censor board would be formed for Travancore. The board – which included the chief secretary,

the Inspector General of Police, the Mayor and P Subrahmaniam himself – reviewed the film, and proposed removing the reels "which showed the cruelties of the Diwan". The film was re-released and brought huge profits for the distributors and the exhibitors. John has mentioned that the success of the film led to the setting up of Geo Pictures. (John 2011a: 11-13) The initiatives from the part of the distributors and exhibitors to set up legal frameworks like a censor board was thus a way of bringing certain operational stability to the distribution-exhibition sectors, wherein the films once reviewed by the board will not have to face the ire of the authorities any longer.[21]

Another interesting aspect about the industry's negotiations with the bureaucracy, the middle class and the pre-industrial forces is the custom of 'free passes'. K V Koshy's accounts provide us with useful insights into the 'free-pass' system, a mechanism of patronage, and how the exhibition sector negotiated with this. Koshy says that owners of temporary and permanent theatres had to offer free passes to "the powerful people" in an area if the shows were to run smoothly. Often, they issued family passes to influential people including government officials and other socially powerful figures. Bureaucrats used to harass theatre-owners in various ways if they were not given customary free

[21] The Thiruvithamcore Film Censor Board was dissolved in January 1951, as the government ordered that the films thereafter would have to be cleared by the Central Censor Board. (*Mathrubhoomi*, 17 January, 1951)

passes whenever a new film opened for exhibition.[22] Though Koshy claims that this often caused huge losses for the exhibitors, there are indications in his account which suggest that this arrangement functioned as a system of patronage. Moreover, it had a de-stigmatizing effect on cinema as a cultural institution. Koshy remembers a travelling cinema operator telling him about his modus operandi:

> Once we reach a new place for conducting exhibition, we first find out the rowdies in the locality. We keep them happy by offering free passes. Then, we offer family tickets to the officials in the Police, Excise, Revenue and other major departments. They come for the show without fail; we welcome them. The sight of some respectable people coming to the theatres would encourage more people to come for the cinema. (Koshy 1968: 24)

It is possible that the 'free pass system' was initiated by the exhibitors as a way of seeking patronage from the socially powerful in a locality, which became a class privilege for the bureaucratic elites. By the 1940s, while a beneficiary of the free-pass system used it to watch films with a sense of being a *privileged* viewer (invoking his official position), the theatre owners used the same system as a device to de-stigmatize cinema in the eyes of the middle class.

[22] See Koshy 1968: 24-26; 37-43. The free pass system is mentioned in a number of autobiographies and memoirs of famous personalities in Kerala. For example see the autobiography of K M Mathew (Mathew 2008: 70-71) and P Ramadas's memoirs about the making of *Newspaper Boy* (Paul 2008: 26).

Early studio films as products of 'bricolage': The case of *Jeevithanowka*

As evidences suggest, the bourgeoning studios in the region identified 'the social' – understood in the scholarship on Indian cinema as a hold-all genre – as the convenient aesthetic and an economically viable formula to incorporate a host of attractions and address a wide audience.[23] By the early 1950s, the studios used strategies of *bricolage* and genre-mixing[24] to mould a new cinema. This allowed them, on the one hand, to respond to the cultural elite's call to contribute to the rationalizing agendas of the state and thus gain legitimacy as modern cultural institutions and, on the other hand, to incorporate and appropriate the popular elements of spectacles (targeting the masses) which were considered as sustaining the commercial cinema in South India in general. An examination of the organization of generic elements in *Jeevithanowka* (The Boat of Life: K Vembu, 1951) provides insights into how the early studio films functioned by competing with, and adopting freely from, the popular theatre and Tamil films, while positioning themselves on the side of an "aesthetic of contemporaneity" (Prasad

[23] Talking about the general tendencies in the studio films of the time, Cynic, a famous commentator, wrote in 1952: "A caring elder brother, his scheming wife, an ideal romantic couple from disparate social backgrounds, the problems that the couple has to face due to the disparities in their social status, the final triumph of their love, and some comedy scenes: these have become the essential ingredients for almost all Malayalam films these days." (*Mathrubhoomi* weekly, 14 September, 1952: 30)

[24] In his recent essay, Madhava Prasad (2011) has shown instances of the film industry in India deploying fabricatory techniques of *bricolage* and genre-mixing as strategies to respond to social change during the 1950s. Christopher Pinney has also pointed out pastiche and *bricolage* as creative devices widely deployed in the mass-produced print images in India to convey new meanings out of the existing reportoires of visual culture practices (See Pinney 2004: 178-79).

2011: 72) which was emerging as dominant in India as well as across the world during the 1950s.

Produced by K & K Productions of K V Koshy and Kunchacko, the film ran for 284 days at Thiruvananthapuram (Vijayakrishnan 1987: 62) and is considered the first major commercial success in Malayalam. The story goes like this: Raju (Sebastian Kunjukunju Bhagavathar) and Soman (Thikkurissi Sukumaran Nair) are brothers. Raju, the elder brother, is like a father-figure for Soman. Raju works as the secretary of a stingy local landlord; his wife, Janu (Pankajavalli), is a greedy, cantankerous woman. The protagonist Soman, an educated man, wants to marry Lakshmi (B S Saroja), his childhood sweetheart and a lower caste woman. Raju and Janu oppose the marriage. Raju, who is more considerate to Soman's desires, eventually agrees to the marriage; thus, Soman and Lakshmi get married. However, the couple has to leave the joint family to a new house as Janu begins to harass Lakshmi. Soon, Soman goes to the town in search of a job, and meets with an accident when a rich family's car hits him down. The family takes Soman to their house and appoints him as the estate manager. Soman decides to stay in the town for a while to make money. He keeps sending money and letters to Lakshmi, but, each time, Janu and her brother destroy the letters and pocket the money. Meanwhile, Lakshmi and her son live in utter poverty amidst harassments by Janu, her relatives as well as the landlord. She decides to leave the place along with her son and reaches the town where Soman lives.

Lakshmi decides to end her life when she accidentally sees Soman along with a woman from the rich family whom she mistakes for Soman's new wife. Reminded of the duty of a mother, she gives up the idea of suicide and starts a welfare organization for beggars. She acts in plays to raise money for the organization.

In the meantime, Janu and Shanku, the landlord's assistant, make plans to steal money from the landlord. While trying to escape with the money, the landlord's advocate gets killed. Mislead by Shanku, the police suspects Raju for the murder and the theft and arrests him. Eventually, it becomes clear that the theft was planned by Shanku, as the Police catch hold of his aides. Meanwhile, Soman returns to his village and learns about the harassment that Lakshmi and his son had to face. In the end, Soman and Lakshmi reunite, and join Raju and a reformed Janu, forming the joint family again.

The narrative is constructed within an overarching framework of the rationalist, egalitarian discourse which was gaining cultural dominance in the wake of the birth of the nation-state as well as the growing sentiments of linguistic nationalism in the region. Meanwhile, the film introduces contrived moments in the plot so as to include sequences from mythological plays, featuring B. S. Saroja, by then a prominent star in Tamil, in central roles. In doing so, the filmmakers were clearly trying to capitalize on the two ingredients that were

deemed to be good business in popular cinema in India – mythological tales and the female star. Besides, this was also an attempt to incorporate the attractions of popular dramas and wean people away from theatre. Incorporating such elements as independent units was a common practice in the cinema during the time. One interesting aspect about this film is the superficial evocation of the rationalist notions of cause and effect, within which these 'spectacles' were sought to be incorporated and subsumed, as I shall try to demonstrate.

As the film approaches its climax, it is through a sequence which involves the staged performance of a Bible tale that the film sets in motion a chain of events that would lead to the re-union of Soman and Lakshmi, the estranged protagonists. The film has already shown us how various circumstances make Lakshmi think that Soman has deserted her for a rich woman. After coming to the town, Lakshmi decides to join a drama troupe and performs at various places in order to raise money for the charity organization that she is part of. Coincidentally, Soman, along with the young woman from the aristocratic family where he works as the manager, comes to watch a performance by Lakshmi's troupe. The drama is based on the story of *Snapakayohannan*[25] – John the Baptist – and Lakshmi (B S Saroja), sporting a beard and carrying a stick, plays the role of the Baptist who invited the wrath of the King by criticizing him for engaging in

[25] Drama performances based on the story of *Snapakayohannan* were famous in the region since 1920s and were repeatedly enacted by commercial drama troupes. Sebastian Kunju Kunju Bhagavathar, one of the leading actors in *Jeevithanowka*, owned his own drama troupe and was a prominent figure in commercial theatre.

adultery and ignoring his duties towards his family and the kingdom. The performance starts with a song-dance sequence that shows the king flirting with women. The song is disrupted, as John the Baptist, played by Lakshmi, enters the scene and begins to scold the king for his immoral ways. As this scene progresses, Lakshmi sees Soman sitting in the first row among the audience, along with the aristocratic woman. However, Soman does not recognize Lakshmi in her make-up. Lakshmi, playing the role of the Baptist, begins to see the image of her own husband in the wayward king. The Baptist's dialogues, now beginning to convey Lakshmi's trauma as well, suddenly attain a sharp accusatory tone. In one shot, the camera is placed behind the stage: the audience can see the king, partly, from behind, and John the Baptist/Lakshmi criticizing the king by pointing his/her finger at the former. In the background, we can also see Soman sitting among the audience, along with the aristocrat woman (Figure i.2). As the moral admonishment progresses, there is a cut to Soman's face, showing him becoming increasingly uncomfortable as if the moral chastisement has had some bearing on him, though logically there is no reason why the moral charge of this scene should upset Soman, since he is not culpable of disloyalty or irresponsibility. Eventually, Soman faints, as if ridden by guilt, and the play comes to an abrupt end when Lakshmi also faints during the performance. Later, Soman decides to return to his village to meet his wife and son, saying that the prophet's speech reminded him of Lakshmi.

Figure i.2: B S Saroja as John the Baptist. **Source:** *Jeevithanowka* (K Vembu, 1951)

The primary purpose of this sequence is to push the narrative into a resolution by bringing the protagonists together, while providing the film with another opportunity to include attractions of the popular theatre – a major source of content for the commercial cinema, as well as its competitor in the entertainment industry during the time.[26] The mythological tale is deployed here to evoke certain emotions (guilt, responsibility towards his family) in Soman so that he would want to go back home and meet his wife. However, interestingly, the

[26] Baskaran notes that all the 61 films made in the first five years of Tamil talkie era were reproductions of stage plays – a practice that continued till the 1950s in South Indian cinema (2009: 30).

particular mythological tale that was being recounted on the stage – of the prophet reminding the wayward King about his responsibilities towards his family and kingdom – did not have any bearing on what was happening to the protagonists in the film. The protagonists are estranged as the result of the evil characters' harassments; what Lakshmi thinks about Soman is the consequence of a misunderstanding – two things that the film clearly conveys to the audience without any ambiguity.

One can identify the filmmakers creatively deploying strategies of fabrication and *bricolage* to evolve a new aesthetic by appropriating popular religious mythological tales (which the Tamil films and popular theatre freely adopted from) and subsuming them under the rationalist, secular discourse privileged and propagated by the modern nation-state as well as the cultural elites. These rather conflicting generic elements are linked through a superficial evocation of the notions of cause and effect in the narrative progression – notions that the popular cinema was exhorted to follow from its inception. The strategies of appropriating from the existing registers of popular visual culture as independent units, subordinating them to the rationalist narrative progression, and often bringing these disparate generic tendencies together through fabricated links, were crucial for the early studio films in Malayalam to survive commercially and attain legitimacy as a cultural institution.

By the late 1940s, when Udaya and Merryland – the first modern studios set up in Kerala – started commercial production of films in Malayalam, the hold-all genre of 'social' provided them with a basic structure to negotiate with the dominant industrial terms set by the Madras-based South Indian cinema on the one hand, and the demands placed on them by the cultural elites in the region as well as the changing socio-historical context during the period, on the other. In industrial terms, these studios adopted the strategy of making films at phenomenally low costs, keeping in mind the geographically narrow linguistic market and the possibilities of simultaneously remaking their films into other languages, thus targeting the South Indian market at large, if not the wider South East Asian market. The popular Tamil films, unassailable in producing grand spectacles out of mythological and fantasy tales, provided a ready source of content and re-deployable visual registers for the early studio films. While adopting various generic elements from them as well as the popular company dramas, the studio films incorporated these ingredients of attractions, and subsumed them under a large narrative structure shaped by the compulsions of the 'aesthetic of contemporaneity', emerging as dominant in the context of the coming of the modern nation state. To borrow Prasad's (2011) observation about the socials of the 1950s, the creative strategies of fabrication, genre-mixing and the devices of *bricolage* enabled the early studios in Kerala to respond to the social-historical changes taking place during the time by redeploying existing resources.

During the first half of the 1950s, the genre of mythological was increasingly being sidelined in Malayalam cinema. While the studios showed a tendency of gradually moving towards family romances, this period also witnessed the emergence of social realism initiated by the Left-affiliated Progressive Writers Group. Deploying melodramatic pathos, the social-realist films dealt with themes of social modernization based on rational thinking. However, mythologicals were to stage a come-back as one of the prominent genres in Malayalam cinema by the early 1960s, a development which needs to be analyzed in the context of the eruption of subjectivities and desires disillusioned with the secular, rationalist ideals propagated by the Left – the 'protagonists' of the modern Malayali nation. In Chapter II and Chapter IV, I discuss various aspects of the Left's interventions in Malayalam cinema during the 1950s.

Chapter II

Imagining a Nation of Rational Subjects: *Neelakkuyil* and the Left's Interventions in Cinema

Academic attention on Malayalam cinema of the 1950s revolves almost entirely around the films that belong to the era of 'social realism', a loose term used in the scholarship on Indian cinema to refer to the aesthetic project that introduced "a thematic shift, focusing attention on the poor and the exploited but continued to feature a melodramatic narrative" (Prasad 1998: 160). In Malayalam cinema, this movement begins with interventions in popular cinema by artists and writers associated with the Progressive Writing Group[1] and Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC)[2] – two bodies that were closely affiliated to the Communist Party in Kerala. In fact, a major chunk of literature on Malayalam cinema would often begin by revisiting this aesthetic movement in order to problematise important aspects like the dominant history's privileging of this era and its films, the representational claims of realism, as well as the new hierarchies and oppositions

[1] Progressive Writing Group was begun as *Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam* (Movement for the Literature about Life) in 1937, with people like E M S Namboodiripad, K Damodaran, P Keshavadev etc. as its founder members. The movement was renamed in 1944 as *Purogamana Sahithya Sangham* (Progressive Writing Group). This forum consisted of most of the well-known writers of the period from Kerala, including P C Kuttikrishnan (known as Uroob) and Ponkunnam Varkey who had written for cinema during the 1950s. See Gopalakrishnan (1987) for a history of *Purogamana Sahithya Sangham.*

[2] Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC) was formed in 1950 by a group of young Communists. KPAC was later affiliated to the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). See Mohandas 2002 for a history of KPAC. Thoppil Bhasi, the most prominent playwright of the KPAC, wrote the screenplays of a number of films in the second half of the 1950s.

that get established in the realm of aesthetics with the advent of social realism in cinema – between melodrama and realism, studio shooting and the use of real locations, etc. However, despite the importance given to the socio-realist films of the 1950s in Malayalam film studies, there has hardly been any attempt to examine in detail the defining features of this aesthetic movement and the specificities of the Left's interventions in popular cinema. This cluster of films is mostly examined in retrospect, where the discussions are framed either by the claims that the dominant historians make on behalf of these films or by the contemporary debate on Malayalam cinema which tries to invoke a nostalgic past of 'good cinema', the genealogy of which begins from the socio-realist cinema of the 1950s. Even as such enquiries enable us to historicize the contestations over aesthetic forms in Malayalam cinema, it also had the inadvertent effect of selectively focusing on some claims that the dominant historians make on behalf of the socio-realist films of the 1950s, while discarding others.

The first section in this chapter discusses the cultural-political context of the Left's interventions in popular cinema in Kerala and examines the precise terms within which dominant histories of Malayalam cinema have accommodated the socio-realist films of the 1950s. Analysing *Neelakkuyil* (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954), the chapter later argues that the aesthetic domain of social realism provided the Left-associated artists with a ground to negotiate with an

industrial-cultural medium like cinema, marked by its popular, melodramatic excesses, and to mould a sphere of the 'new popular' that would address 'the masses' – the object of the Left's political mobilization – and, at the same time, negotiate the (high caste) middle class's position in the imminent modern nation of Malayalees. These artists' early initiatives in cinema targeted the masses as the primary addressee, attempted to educate them in the reformed idioms of popular cinema, and sought to call into existence the new Malayali nation of rational subjects on behalf of them, even while catering to various desires as anxieties of the middle class literati and the elites. They appropriated the space of the cinema hall, marked by the presence of 'the masses', to give shape to an aesthetic of the 'new popular' on the one hand, and on the other, to negotiate the high castes' position in the new nation of Malayalees *before* the mass audience of popular cinema. It argues that *Neelakkuyil* combines the elements of the star-cinema typical of the South Indian case, and the aesthetic traits – in its choice of the theme and the representational strategies – that one can identify in the progressive realist cinema in Hindi and Bengali during the late 1940s and the early 1950s.[3] This complicates the existing understanding of the film as the beginning of a cinema in Malayalam that primarily addressed the middle class. The chapter also argues that if the 'nationalist' address based on a common language characterized the commercial, star cinema of the 1950s in the other

[3] Hindi films like *Dharti Ke Lal* (K A Abbas, 1946) and *Do Bhigha Zameen* (Bimal Roy, 1953), Bengali films like *Udayer Pathe* (Bimal Roy, 1946), Babla (Agradoot, 1951) and *Chhinnamul* (Nimai Ghosh, 1951) are examples. The involvement, direct or indirect, of the artists associated with Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in these films is striking. Also see Biswas 2010.

south Indian states, in the case of Kerala, the Left conceived and proposed a discourse of rationality, imagined as emanating from Communism, as the uniting element of Malayali nationalism, an aspect which was to have major implications in the region's cultural realm towards the end of the decade. The anxieties surrounding the position of various communities/castes in this newly imagined rational-secular Malayali nation animated the narrative preoccupations in the socio-realist films of the 1950s.

Socio-realist films of the 1950s in the dominant history

It would be worthwhile to begin this exercise by revisiting some of the dominant historical accounts about Malayalam cinema in order to identify the precise terms within which the socio-realist films of the 1950s are accommodated in these histories. If one were to look through a couple of historical narratives about Malayalam cinema and analyse them together, it becomes clear that the dominant history's stake in the social realism of the 1950s is mainly as a pre-cursor to the 'art cinema' of the 1970s and the 1980s in Malayalam, which brought national as well as international acclaim to Malayalam cinema through the films of directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan. The primary interest of these historical narratives, all of them written during the 1980s or later, rests on this 'art cinema' which is considered a matter of pride for Malayalees,[4] at a time

[4] The dominant historical accounts often put forth culturalist arguments by proposing a causal relation between sociological factors like the high literacy rate among Malayalees and the

when the institution of popular cinema in India was being looked down upon by critics as well as academicians for failing to adhere to the standards of Hollywood realism – considered the universal yardstick to judge cinema across the world. As the dominant historical accounts, written from a teleological perspective, attempt to construct a longer history for the moment of arrival of the 'aesthetically matured' art cinema of the 1970s and 1980s in Malayalam, the social realism of the 1950s was identified as a *preliminary phase*, mainly because of its thematic engagement with 'social issues' and the attempts to introduce 'nativity' in character portrayal, dialogues, music as well as the narrative backdrop.

For example, discussing *Neelakkuyil* (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954) and other socio-realist films of the 1950s in Malayalam, Vijayakrishnan writes:

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emergence of art cinema in Malayalam. This has resulted in claims about 'Malayali cultural superiority' becoming a commonsense in discussions about cinema in Kerala. For example, the official website of the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) tries to suggest a causal link between the 'cultural sophistication' of Malayalees and Malayalam cinema's propensity towards 'realism' in the following manner: "The viewers in Kerala enjoy the films while comprehending the reality in it. They possess a high degree of insight and intuition and distinguish reality from fiction in the themes of experimentalism. […] Kerala has a very rich art and cultural background. Its films are unique in several aspects. Unlike the other linguistic films, which have started off taking themes from the Puranas, Malayalam films have taken relevant social issues as its theme from the beginning" (http://malayalamcinema.com/Content-4/Cinema-History.html; retrieved on 18/03/08).

Apart from pointing towards the culturalist assumptions within which aesthetic practices are explained, this passage also hints at the reasons behind the assimilation of socio-realist films of the 1950s within dominant accounts about Malayalam cinema which most often tend to become accounts about the career of realism in Malayalam cinema. Here, the thematic focus on social issues (as opposed to myth) becomes the criteria for being accommodated in the history of 'progressive', 'realist' Malayalam cinema.

> The exposure to international cinema [after the international film festival of 1952 in India] and its influence were not reflected in South Indian film industries except in Malayalam cinema. The [progressive] transformations that were taking place in Malayalam cinema were clearly noticeable. However, these changes had nothing to do with the International film festival or the arrival of [Satyajit] Ray [in Indian cinema]. Rather, cinema in Malayalam was gradually coming under the influence of literature. […] *Neelakkuyil* had a *Keraleeyatha* [Kerala-ness] that was never seen in Malayalam films until then. Every frame of the film pulsated with the rustic images of a Kerala village. Characters were drawn from everyday life. The most important aspect about this film was that it replaced the artificial backdrops used in films until then, with its dynamic, vibrant and realistic settings. […] The screenplay reflects the skills of Uroob in writing touching stories about the ordinary life of people. However, theatricality dominates in dialogues and the conception of scenes. As was the convention in other popular films of the time, dialogues continued to gain prominence [over visual elements] in this film too. […] The photography signified a shift by introducing depth to images, compared to the conventional use of 'flat' images. […] The film also inaugurated a tradition of using authentic tunes and lyrics in film music. (Vijayakrishnan 1987: 74-78)[5]

As the passage quoted above suggests, what prompts the dominant historian to claim the socio-realist cinema of the 1950s and to begin the story of the

[5] Another account describes *Neelakkuyil* as a "melodramatic film full of songs and dance" (Ramankutty 1989/2006: 6). Ramankutty says: "The linear flow of the narrative was not given importance in the early Malayalam films. Films were often made by simply sticking together a number of disparate incidents. At times, they dealt with social issues, directly or indirectly. They also tried to entertain the audience. Scenes were not organised along a linear thread. One can see all these aspects in *Neelakkuyil*" (ibid: 11). Similar views can be seen in the reviews of these films that appeared in newspapers and periodicals.

'aesthetically superior' Malayalam cinema from this movement is mainly the deployment of *nationalist realism* that imagines the nation, its people and landscape, rather than the use of *narrative realism* (associated with classical Hollywood cinema), where all the elements in the film are subordinated to the linear progression of the narrative.[6] Beyond that, these films are described as "*not worthy of even being compared* to films like Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali"* (Vijayakrishnan 1987: 81; emphasis added). The impulses of nationalist realism seeking to portray the people in the region "represented in their objective there-ness" (Prasad 1998: 62) was one of the most appreciated aspect of the film when it came out, as the reviews that appeared in the print media during the time also suggest. For example, Cynic, a prominent film critic of the time, begins his review of the film by saying that "notwithstanding its limitations, *Neelakkuyil* is a good Malayalam film worth watching". Listing some of the alluring elements in the film, he writes:

> Uroob, who wrote the story, screenplay and dialogues, deserves credit for the film's success. He succeeded in creating characters that connect well with the common people. *Though some of these characters do not have any function in the linear progression of the narrative, they do not bore us because of their authentic portrayal*. The vibrant, lively dialogues ooze life into the film.

[6] Madhava Prasad uses 'nationalist realism' to describe Italian neo-realism and the realist experiments in Indian 'new cinema'. This aesthetic movement, according to Prasad, functions as "one of the mechanisms of the modern state's hegemonic project, giving *substance* to the state's claim to represent the 'nation' that it encompasses" (Prasad 1998: 61; emphasis in the original). In contrast, the realist imperative in classical Hollywood cinema "consists in according primacy to the features of a rationally-ordered society – relations of causality, progression along a linear continuum marked by motivation, credibility, and action submitted, in the ultimate instance, to the narrative possibilities arising from the operation of the rule of law; the realist text in this sense is a sign of bourgeois hegemony" (ibid: 62).

> […] The outdoor shots, used in plenty, succeed in conveying the sense that the story takes place in Kerala. The *uchikuduma* [typical tuft of hair] of the Nair *karanavar*, the Namboodiri's *paan*-box, the traditional evening lamp customarily lit beside the *thulasi* [holy basil] plant at the Nair house, the village restaurant, the Marar and his drum, the Mappila's fishing net… all these add to the Kerala-ness of the film. […] *Though Moithu's character does not fit into the narrative scheme*, the role was essayed excellently by Balakrishna Menon. (*Mathrubhoomi*, 7 November, 1954: 31–3, emphasis added)[7]

The point of quoting extensively from these accounts was to foreground the visual pleasures that the film evoked, both for the writing elites of the time as well as for the historians later. While the portrayal of nativity was one of the highlights of *Neelakkuyil*, the film clearly did not qualify as a text that follows conventions of classical realism.[8] This should persuade us to revisit and historicize the Left's interventions in art and cinema. Though class revolution is not the theme of *Neelakkuyil*, this project considers the film as a Left initiative considering the involvement of artists associated with the Progressive Writing Group.

[7] The terms Nair, Namboodiri and Marar refer to Hindu caste groups. Mappila is a term commonly used to refer to both Muslims and Christians in Kerala. In this case, it refers to the Muslim character Moithu in the film.

[8] In a number of dominant historical narratives, the period of 'neo-realism' starts in Malayalam cinema with *Newspaper Boy* (P Ramdas, 1955). See Chapter III for a discussion on the film.

The Left's cultural interventions and popular cinema

Theoretically, a commitment to social progress (over aesthetic, literary values) and an insistence on reaching out to the masses to educate them in 'good', 'progressive' art seem to be the two most important governing principles for the interventions of the artists and writers associated with the Left in the fields of literature, theatre and cinema. In addition, aspects like portraying 'authentic' images of the region's landscape and people, and an ethnographic detailing of the mobilized working class were the other important aesthetic considerations for this movement. For example, the essays of E M S Namboodiripad, written during the 1950s on art and literature, reflect an endorsement of a lesser emphasis on literariness and a greater stress on the need to adopt from, as well as reflect, the day-to-day life of the common people[9]. In these essays, E M S was positioning himself, as a Marxist, in favour of a meaningful practice of art that supports progressive social movements, as against the proponents of the art-for-art's-sake theory, by endorsing a model of literature that combines aesthetic concerns with social commitment, where the emphasis is on the latter.[10] This was to be supplemented by the authentic representation of the region, its culture and people, etc., as is evident in the choice of the title for the movement he was a

[9] See Namboodiripad 1937/1998, and Namboodiripad 1954/1998 – two essays that elaborate his views on the ideal use of literature and theatre.

[10] E M S wrote in 1937: "What does the *Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam* propose to the artists? It is that they should advocate and support the progressive forces in the society. […]. This does not mean that *Jeeval Sahithyam* should sacrifice artistic values in favour of progress. *Jeeval Sahithyam* does not disrespect aesthetic values. However, the movement would insist that one should not stand for conservatism in the name of aesthetics" (Namboodiripad 1937/1998: 19–20).

founder member of – *Jeeval Sahithya Prasthānam* ('Movement for the Literature about Life').[11] The espousal of nationalist realism (or aesthetic realism) combined well with the communists' desire to see the mobilized working class represented in literature and plays.[12] This is evident in his essays discussing the popular plays written by the playwrights associated with the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC). Endorsing the transformations that KPAC's popular socialist plays like *Pāttabākki* (*Rent Arrears*: K Damodaran, 1939) and *Ningalenne Communistākki* (*You Made Me a Communist*: Thoppil Bhasi, 1952) effected in the theatre traditions that existed in Kerala, E M S wrote:

> In *Pāttabākki* and *Ningalenne Communistākki,* Damodaran and Bhasi have tried to mould characters and their relationships out of the social reality they encountered while trying to support and lead the organised movements of the working class, farmers and agricultural labourers. […] The success of these plays rests on the playwrights' ability to grasp the pulse of people's lives, their quest to understand the everyday struggles of the masses as well as the transformations that happen in the society, and their skill to mould characters and plot out of such experiences. (Namboodiripad 1954/1998: 40–1)

[11] E M S found it difficult to explain the choice of the term '*Jeeval Sahithyam*' as the title for the movement over something like '*purogamana sahithyam*' (which stands for 'progressive literature'), given the emphasis that he had given to the need for literature to facilitate progress in society. He wrote: "I have always felt that *Jeeval Sahithyam* is not the proper equivalent for the English term 'Progressive Literature'. The former term does not instantly convey the sense that 'progress' is at the heart of this movement. However, progress undoubtedly is the life of the movement" (Namboodiripad 1937/1998: 21). The inconsistency between the title of the movement and its thematic agenda, which Namboodiripad acknowledges but fails to explain, indicates that the ethnographic detailing of the region, its people and their lives – thus producing a discourse about the region – was central to this aesthetic movement, despite the overt emphasis on 'social progress' as its primary objective.

[12] See also Menon 1994: 148–51.

Art was not just supposed to reflect the struggles and life of the ordinary people, it should connect easily with the masses. In this sense, its *popular* nature was considered a positive criterion.[13] My intention is not to deny the pedagogical nature of the Leftist cultural interventions. In fact, 'the masses' were considered the objects of reform into a new 'progressive' aesthetic, in need of political awakening, as the site of the civilizing mission of the new nation-state, etc.; nevertheless, they remained the primary target audience for 'progressive' art as well as *the* legitimate source of creative energy. It is significant to note that in the introduction to Thoppil Bhasi's second play *Sarveykkallu* carried brief notes recording the playwright's "indebtedness to the lives and words of ordinary people made heroic by circumstances" (Menon 2001: 263).

Considering these aspects discussed above, one could summarize the ideology of the Left's progressive art in the following manner: the everyday life and struggles of 'ordinary people' (the working class) were the substance and source of inspiration for the progressive art movement; out of this 'raw material', the cultural producers realize and articulate the class interests of the working class and project them back to the masses through literature, plays, etc. What is striking in this outlook is a certain valorization of working class life as the *only*

[13] Commending the initiatives of the KPAC in theatre, E M S lists three reasons to assert the historical importance of this movement: "1. KPAC's plays were *the most frequently staged* plays in Kerala, 2. these plays led to the emergence of several theatre artists and facilitated the formation of theatre groups all over Kerala, and 3. they were *extremely popular*" (Namboodiripad 1954 / 1998: 34; emphasis added).

legitimate source for the progressive art to draw from, and a simultaneous imagining of the toiling masses – the primary target audience – as susceptible to 'false consciousness' which prevents them from realizing their own class interest, and which thus necessitates their 'awakening' through progressive art.

Ajithkumar's (2008) essay, problematising the genealogy of 'Malayaliness' in songs from the KPAC plays, points at this paradoxical nature of the Left-associated artists' interventions, by citing the story behind the song titled "*Moolippattumayi Thambran Varumbol"* ("When the lord comes humming a tune") from the famous KPAC play *Ningalenne Communistakki* (1952). Written by O N V Kurup, the famous poet in Malayalam, the song alludes to a real-life incident that took place in the early 1950s in Kerala, when a Dalit peasant woman refused sexual favours to a high caste feudal lord and insulted him by throwing a bundle of paddy in his face. The poet has said in interviews that the song was inspired by "the peasant woman's courage" (Ajithkumar 2008: 16). Analyzing the song, he points out:

> Though O N V says that the peasant woman "showed courage", the song is written in a tone of advice [to peasant women in general]: "*Moolippattumayi Thambran Varumbol, Choolaathangu Nilladi Penne"* ("When the lord comes humming a tune/ O girl! Be strong and stand up to him"). Ultimately, it

becomes the task of the Communist to liberate the "peasant woman" by uprooting the feudal order. (ibid)[14]

The anecdote is useful to illustrate the point about the Left-associated cultural producers' simultaneous imagining of the working class or 'the masses' as the source for creative and political energy, as well as the targets of political awakening through art. This conception of the 'masses' had decisive significance for the narratives that the socio-realist films of the 1950s staged, the representational strategies in them and the spectatorial address they constituted, given the fact that these 'masses' constituted (in the imagination of the cultural producers) the traditional audience of popular cinema and theatre. One of the attempts in this chapter would be to push this idea and argue that the 'mass audience' was attributed with a certain rationality and modern values that other sections of the population seemed to be lacking, and how the *look* of this 'rational subaltern' audience, that often received the status of being what I would call 'the ethical population' in the Left imagination, was a decisive factor in the dominant textual form of the new popular cinema that the Left-affiliated artists shaped during the 1950s.

[14] Ajithkumar's essay problematizes the general perception that there is an innate 'Malayali-ness' to the songs which were composed for KPAC plays and were later known independently as 'KPAC songs'. He argues that KPAC songs were the results of the attempts to formulate a new popular musical practice – different from the songs used in Malayalam and Tamil company dramas of the time – that appeals to the masses and is 'close to their lives' in tune and lyrics. The essay argues that mixing the tunes and lyrics of 'local' folk songs (which would signify 'nativity' and 'closeness to ordinary life') with the classical musical traditions used in popular Tamil film music and company dramas was identified as a formula to invent a new popular 'Malayali' musical practice which would not be 'too folk' or 'too classical'. KPAC songs were exemplars of this tradition.

Arguing that the Muslim character Moithu in the narrative schema of *Neelakkuyil* stood for the *look* of the 'rational subaltern' audience institutionalized within the text, I shall try to delineate some of the important elements related to the Left's imagination of 'the masses' and their close relation to the nature of sub-nationalism in the region as well as the preoccupation of socialist realism with self-reforming protagonists. Moreover, the film has two protagonists: one is the middle class/caste character who undergoes self-reformation; the other is an ideal figure who, I would argue, represents the moral authority of the region. The available scholarship on *Neelakkuyil* has focused only on the former. This project considers it important to analyze the significance of the latter figure as well. It attempts to argue that infusing this ideal character with the charisma associated with the Communist figure was a crucial strategy that enabled the film to imagine a new moral authority for the region, who would also negotiate between the masses and the high caste middle class hero, only to institute the latter at the centre of the imminent cultural entity of Malayalee nation.

On *Neelakkuyil*, Moithu and the Left's imagination of 'the masses'

Produced by T K Pareekkutty and written by Uroob, *Neelakkuyil* puts forth the reformist message of caste egalitarianism. The film is about the self-reformation of Sreedharan Nair (Sathyan), an upper caste school teacher, who impregnates Neeli (Miss Kumari), a Dalit woman, but refuses to marry her saying he has to "respect the sentiments of his community". Sreedharan Nair later marries Nalini

(Prema), who is from a decaying Nair family. Meanwhile Neeli, the pregnant Dalit woman, after being expelled from her community, gives birth to a boy, and dies near a rail track. Neeli's baby is rescued and nurtured by Shankaran Nair (P Bhaskaran), a postman and a radical figure in the film, who is ignorant of the fact that Sreedharan Nair is the father of the child. Later, Sreedharan Nair feels guilty for what he did to Neeli, and decides to adopt the Dalit boy Mohan. In the end, Shankaran Nair, the foster father, hands over the Dalit boy to Sreedharan Nair and Nalini, asking them to "bring him up as a human being, not as a Nair, Pulaya or a Mappila".

Most of the critical attention in the scholarship on *Neelakkuyil* has revolved around the self-reforming character of Sreedharan Nair, played by Sathyan, in the film. The centrality of this upper caste character in a narrative that advocates caste egalitarianism has been pointed out as indicative of how the Left-initiated project of social realism in cinema had the (upper caste) middle class as its primary addressee from its beginning. Meanwhile, the morally upright, ideal character of Shankaran Nair – played by P Bhaskaran, one of the directors of the film – receives far less academic attention, possibly because of the 'unglamorous' way in which he is cast. This strategy of casting is one of the aspects that I would like to foreground and examine, to argue that it provides us important clues about the commercial as well as aesthetic features of the Left's interventions in popular cinema in Malayalam. It is plausible to argue that this splitting of the

audience 'identification' between two protagonists – one the self-reforming middle class hero and the other a morally resolute figure – signifies the film's attempt to combine the elements of star-cinema of the South Indian variety addressing and mobilizing the masses (where the star protagonist symbolizes and represents the regional polity) and the elements of nationalist realism catering to the middle class audience. However, the strategies of casting suggests that the devices of the star cinema were being deployed and appropriated for reinstating the middle class hero at the centre of the cultural imaginary. An examination of the place of the Muslim character Moithu in the film's narrative schema would be a good starting point to examine how the portrayal of Shankaran Nair closely resembles the modes in which 'the star' was often portrayed in South Indian language films of the period as the representative of the region and its people.

Moithu (Balakrishna Menon) is a marginal character in the film as far as the plot is concerned, and his function would appear to be somewhat that of a comedian. He does not have any significant role in the narrative progression as well. However, Moithu's presence in the narrative schema has a crucial significance, as I shall try to establish, examining which would give us interesting insights about the audience whom the aesthetic reform project of social realism addressed, and how this audience was conceived. Evidences suggest that Moithu's character and the 'Mappila' song that he sings in the film became major attractions of the film.

While the song 'Kayalarikathu', composed by the music director K Raghavan, became extremely popular, the critics were similarly impressed by the character portrayal and the actor who played the role, as well as with the song. Apart from the impressive lyrics and composition of the love song, the character's appeal – both to the masses and to critics – could probably be the result of factors that arouse ethnographic interests, like his attire, the 'Muslim dialect' interspersed with puns that Moithu speaks, as well as the pranks he plays upon other characters in the film. Moreover, the prominence that Moithu's character gets in the film seems to indicate the film's attempt to appeal to the audience from Malabar, a region that was considered culturally distant from other parts of the Malayalam-speaking regions, and considered 'backward' in the development index than the other two princely states, but also a region where the Communist Party had a decisive influence.[15] However, our interest here is to analyze the significance of this character for the narrative that the film unfolds, and for the cultural politics that the Leftist cultural interventions sought to effect.

A close look at some of the scenes in which Moithu appears in the film would suggest that his presence within the narrative coincides with or duplicates the presence of the viewers watching the film. Both Moithu as well as the viewers are

[15] Indicating the popularity that Moithu's character gained in Malabar, an article said that "Moithu's character played by Balakrishna Menon and the Mappila song '*Kayalarikathu'* became very popular among Malayalees, especially those from Malabar." (Achyut, 'Chalachitra Vyavasayam Keralathil', *Mathrubhumi*, October 28, 1956). Malabar, in the dominant as well as popular imagination in Kerala, is often marked as a 'Muslim' region.

'witnesses' to the 'real' story in the film, and they commonly share the same knowledge about the film's diegetic world. I shall try to substantiate this claim by referring to three scenes.

1. Early into the film, the spectators see Nalini's mother and the Karanavar in the family deciding to arrange Nalini's marriage with her wayward cousin Kuttan Nair, in the hope that the latter would mend his ways once he gets married. In the next scene, Moithu stops Kuttan Nair on his way, and asks him whether it is true that he is getting married soon. The narrative does not offer any justification as to how Moithu came to know about the private discussion regarding Kuttan Nair's marriage which happened in the Nair household where Moithu was not present.
2. Later, Nalini's marriage is fixed with Sreedharan Nair, when the postman informs Nalini's mother that Sreedharan Nair wishes to marry Nalini. In the following scene, Moithu again stops Kuttan Nair on his way and informs him that the marriage between Nalini and Sreedharan Nair has been fixed. Again, the narrative does not clarify how Moithu came to know about the marriage between Nalini and Sreedharan, even before Kuttan Nair gets to know about it.
3. In another instance, after Shankaran Nair, the postman, rescues the Dalit woman Neeli's child, Moithu meets the postman at a tea shop. In this scene, Moithu offers the postman tea, saying that he admired the postman for deciding to rescue the child, braving the opposition of the upper castes

from the village. Once again, it is intriguing to note that Moithu was absent when the postman rescued the child.

The significance that I find in these scenes is the fact that Moithu is absent in the scenes when the *real action* takes place on all the three above-mentioned occasions (i.e., when the marriage of Nalini is fixed first with Kuttan Nair, and later with Sreedharan Nair, and when the postman rescues the Dalit boy). However, in the scenes that follow the above-mentioned developments on all the three occasions, Moithu appears to already know what happened in the previous scenes, just like the audience watching the film (naturally) gets to know what has happened in the previous scenes. Hence, it seems plausible to argue that Moithu's presence in the film duplicates that of the audience watching the film. His presence within the narrative is *the presence and the look of the audience institutionalized within the diegetic world of the film*. There is an interesting relay of knowledge between the audience and Moithu that enables the latter to make ethical judgments about the diegetic characters and situations. We need to look into the logic behind this aspect. What is the significance when a non-Hindu character's look duplicates that of the audience in a social film which talks about caste equality in Kerala, a multi-religious society?

It is obvious that a film with a reformist message presupposes a target audience – a social group to which the message should reach, which needs to be reformed.

However, what we have in *Neelakkuyil* is a case, where the delivering of a reformist message to a particular social group within the narrative is staged as a spectacle for an audience whose social profile is conceived as different from that of the 'target group' that receives the reformist message *in* the film's narrative. Thus, the postman Shankaran Nair, the radical modern figure in the film, delivers the message of caste equality to the upper castes in the village (including our protagonist Sreedharan Nair) who practice untouchability. But the film's ideological task is completed only when this act of delivering the message, as well as the self-reformation of the Nair protagonist, *is staged in front of the look* of people from other castes and communities. Hence, the audience's gaze becomes an integral part of the film, and the way in which this audience is conceived by the filmmakers – in terms of its social profile and cultural attributes – plays an important part in the way the narrative elements are organized in a film.

Keeping this in mind, we shall try to explore the possibilities of making some useful assumptions about the *social and cultural profile of the audience a film like* Neelakkuyil *presupposed.* As we discussed earlier, the interventions of the Left in theatre and cinema during the 1940s and the 1950s were governed by the aspiration to reform the sites of popular entertainment culture, and 'the masses' were conceived as the primary target audience for this pedagogic, aesthetic

project.[16] A quick overview of the print-media discourse on cinema during the time (see Chapter I: 46-54, for some of the examples) would tell us that the mass audience of popular cinema, in the dominant cultural imagination, was not a neutral/secular category. Popular cinema's traditional audience was conceived as being mostly constituted by the lower class, plebian, subaltern, illiterate masses.[17] Traces of this dominant cultural imagination about 'the mass audience' seem to have influenced the Left-affiliated cultural producers and their interventions as well (though their conception of the masses had its own specificities – an aspect we will have an occasion to discuss soon). In other words, the gaze of the plebian, subaltern spectators pre-existed the aesthetic reform initiatives in the field of cinema in Kerala during the 1950s, and it was this gaze – the gaze of the 'subaltern' audience – that the makers of socio realist films *addressed and appropriated.* While social realism introduced new aesthetic idioms (like nationalist realism, progressive modernist narratives instead of

[16] P Bhaskaran, one of the directors of the movie, was a proponent of an aesthetic which connects with the masses, and believed in the use of cinema for facilitating social transformation. He wrote in 1974:

> Some of the proponents of 'new cinema' believe that if cinema as a medium has a commitment towards anything, it is only to itself, and that it is in no way committed to the audience, the society or the nation. (…) The insistence that cinema should not be enjoyable for the common people appears to be the result of this outlook. Those who believe in this theory seem to be governed by a contempt for the audience, complete disdain for those who make popular films, the prejudice that whatever the masses enjoy – whether it is comedy, songs, story or performance – is third rate, etc. I believe that cinema should be used as a progressive medium containing messages of social transformation. (…) All the thinking directors and filmmakers should try to use the potentials of the medium and bring in radical changes in the life of the common people. ("Cinema cinemakku vendi?" *Nana*, 29 December, 1974: 46).

[17] S V Srinivas (2000) has also argued that irrespective of the audience's social background, the cinema assumed the status of a subaltern institution during the 1940s and the 1950s.

mythical themes, etc.) to the mass audience of popular cinema, the narrative strategies sought to evolve a popular consensus required for calling into existence the secular Malayali nation of rational subjects, and for instituting the reformed Hindu upper caste male figure at its centre. A process of nomination and authorization is involved here, through which a *discourse of rational-secular thinking* – imagined as emanating from the ideology of Communism – was instituted as the basis of the new 'nation' of Malayalees. The role that language played in mobilizing the linguistic nationalities in other South Indian regions is substituted by this overarching discourse of rationality in Kerala, mobilizing various communities and castes in the region into one nation of Malayalees. And it is the negotiations with this dominant discourse that institutes the Hindu high caste male figure at the centre of the new 'nation'. *The space of the cinema hall, where the gaze of the 'subaltern' spectators pre-exists, becomes the site for the articulation of these processes.* We will have occasion to discuss some of these aspects in detail later in the chapter.

If we analyze the patterns followed in the representational scheme in *Neelakkuyil*, it becomes clear that Moithu is one of the very few characters in the film who is portrayed as possessing desirable progressive values like rationality and versatility, in sharp contrast to most of the other characters (including Sreedharan Nair, one of the protagonists) who are portrayed as either caught up in casteism or as incapable of moving out of the moralities of various

degenerated traditions (like Nalini's cousin Kuttan Nair, a prodigal young man from a disintegrating Nair family, and her father – an irresponsible, casteist Namboodiri, etc). Moithu makes fun of every upper caste character in the film who comes into his vicinity (except Shankaran Nair, because "he has real guts", and Sreedharan Nair, who is to be redeemed by the narrative through the staging of self-reformation); he invokes laughter mostly through pranks on the 'irrational' upper caste characters (the Namboodiri Brahmin, the Nair who runs the tea shop, Kuttan Nair, the wayward young descendent of the Nair family, the timid Marar, etc.), and the narrative suggests that they deserve to be mocked precisely for their incapability to think rationally, which is 'the need of the time'. The humour that Moithu evokes is witty, not comical; it emerges from the capabilities that he is endowed with to make spontaneous ethical assessments of situations and characters. The rational values that the film upholds match perfectly with the values that Moithu possesses; or at least there seems to be no conflict between them. He is the only one who can accept and appreciate Shankaran Nair's 'radical' persona. In short, Moithu and Shankaran Nair are the only rational subjects in the film.

Placing this proposition together with the earlier suggestion that Moithu stands in for the 'subaltern' mass audience of popular cinema, we can arrive at a formulation about the cultural attributes of 'the masses' in the Left's imagination. One could say that the category of 'the masses', in the Left imagination,

constituted 'the ethical population', clearly endowed with certain capabilities of rational thinking and ethical judgment – values that are crucial for participation in a democratic polity, and that the other sections of population (including the Hindu high caste Nairs) seemed to be lacking in.[18] This is not to suggest that the masses were conceived of as capable of articulating their 'rationality' in political terms. The film shows Moithu always talking in the 'local' dialect associated with the Muslim community, while Shankaran Nair is able to articulate in the language (devoid of dialectical influences) of rational politics with ease. What characterizes 'the masses' is, thus, their *spontaneous* rationality and their impulsive discretionary capabilities – in short, a 'rustic modernity', if one may call it so. Shankaran Nair is thus the 'unmarked', modern subject, whose legitimacy emanates from, and is reaffirmed by, the approval of Moithu, and the mass audience of popular cinema that he represents.

The Communist as the representative of the region

The casting of P Bhaskaran, one of the directors of the film, in the role of Shankaran Nair is an important strategy that enables the film to construct this character as the only modern, rational figure with considerable moral authority. Literally speaking, Shankaran Nair's character is the only exception in the film,

[18] It may be remembered that Krishna Pillai, the co-founder of the Socialist Party, wrote in 1934 that "Capitalism will be destroyed and the ruling of the country will pass into the hands of *daridranarayanan* [the poor]". Krishna Pillai, '*Fascisavum kammyunisavum*' ('Fascism and Communism'), *Mathrubhumi*, 18 April 1934; quoted in Menon 1994: 190)

while all other upper caste characters are portrayed as caught within pre-modern power structures. He is a resolutely ideal figure, elevated and placed above all other diegetic characters. It is striking that this role was reserved for Bhaskaran instead of Sathyan, a budding star of the time[19] who played the self-reforming character of Sreedharan Nair. P Bhaskaran was a literary figure already known for his communist sympathies.[20] It is by infusing the (extra-diegetic, extra-cinematic) charisma of the Communist figure, through strategies of casting P Bhaskaran in the role, that the film constructs Shankaran Nair as the supreme modern-rational figure drawing adulation and reverence. He, thus, represents the unfaltering spirit of rationality, the basis of Malayalee nationalism, and mobilizes the region into one unity of modern nation-hood.[21]

One of the scenes mentioned above becomes crucial in this context. In this scene, Moithu offers the postman Shankaran Nair a glass of tea, since the latter "has shown tremendous guts" in rescuing the Dalit boy, braving the opposition of the upper castes from the village. The film expects from the audience the same

[19] By the time *Neelakkuyil* was released, Sathyan had acted in three films – *Athmasakhi* (G R Rao, 1952), *Ashadeepam* (G R Rao, 1953) and *Lokaneethi* (R Velappan Nair, 1953).

[20] P Bhaskaran was a member of the Communist Party in Kerala, and had a brief career as the lyricist for Left theatre before coming to cinema. His poem '*Vayalar Garjikkunnu*', inspired by the peasant rebellion of Punnapra Vayalar (1946), was banned in Travancore.

[21] See Radhakrishnan (2010) for a discussion on the exchanges between the popular Left and the middle cinema in Malayalam, including the socio-realist films of the 1950s. He has cited a number of instances from the history of Malayalam cinema when the star charisma of the Left leaders in Kerala was channelised into cinema to infuse the protagonists with extra-cinematic authority, though *Neelakkuyil* does not figure in this list of films in his analysis.

adoration that Moithu has for Shankaran Nair. It is not a coincidence that the film chose Moithu, the Muslim character, to show admiration towards Shankaran Nair for his 'bravery'. Moithu's Muslim identity, I would argue, symbolically stands for the subaltern social groups that nominate the ideal rational figure Shankaran Nair to represent them, authorizing him to speak/act on behalf of them.[22] This relation of adulation and nomination between Moithu and Shankaran Nair is similar, in certain ways, to the representational strategies in the star-films of South India, where the comedian would often figure as the fan/admirer of the star, nominating and elevating the latter to the position of being the representative of the linguistic nation.[23]

[22] There are other supplementary mechanisms through which Shankaran Nair emerges as the representative of the subaltern sections of the population. We will have occasion to discuss those aspects in the final section of this chapter.

[23] See Prasad 1999. It should be highlighted here that the theorizations about the nature of star-adulation in South India have drawn from Slavoj Zizek's contribution to the understanding of the psychic process of 'identification' – an important aspect for studies of 'interpellative' cultural forms like cinema. For Zizek, there is a difference between 'symbolic identification' and 'imaginary identification'. He writes:

> [I]n imaginary identification, we imitate the other at the level of resemblance – we identify ourselves with the image of the other inasmuch as we are 'like him', while in symbolic identification we identify ourselves with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable, at a point which eludes resemblance. (Zizek 1989/2008: 109)

Using this distinction, Madhava Prasad has pointed out that in the 'star films' of South Indian cinema, as well as in the mobilizational films in Hindi during the 1970s starring Amitabh Bachchan, the link between the audience/fan and the star on screen is that of symbolic identification (whereas the audience's imaginary identification happens with the comedian or sidekick in these films, who would often be a fan of the star in the film, authorizing the latter to *represent* him) (Prasad 1998: 76). See also Radhakrishnan 2010: 37.

The Left and the specificities of 'Malayali nationalism'

Neelakkuyil, thus, offers us venues for reflecting on some aspects about the specificities of 'sub-nationalism' in Kerala, in comparison to the linguistic nationalities in the South India. Studies on cinema and the film culture in the three south Indian states – namely, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu – provides valuable insights into the political transformations that take place with the emergence of linguistic sub-nationalities in South India, following the mass mobilizations on the basis of language during the 1940s and the linguistic reorganization of the states in 1956. These were sub-national entities since they did not claim sovereignty or undermine the overarching authority of the Indian nation-state, though the relations between all the South Indian states and the federal government at the centre were always fraught with tension; nevertheless, they assumed dimensions of nationalities, addressing themselves as linguistically homogenous territories, where mass mediums like cinema were used "to re-centre the popular consciousness" (Prasad 2009: 74) around these new cultural entities. (Hence, in this project, the terms 'sub-nationalism' and 'nationalism' are used interchangeably in the discussion on the linguistic nationalities in South India.)

The dimensions in which linguistic nationalism and cinema are closely connected in south Indian regions (except Kerala) are well-known. In Telugu, Tamil and

Kannada, with the arrival of the talkies, the film industry tried to appeal directly to the respective linguistic communities through films. As Prasad points out:

> Cinema suddenly proved itself to be an effective means of integration of populations previously scattered across different presidencies and princely states, into one linguistic nationality. For the film producers, initially, this was no more than a marketing strategy, what they were aiming for was a national market for a cultural product that spoke in a particular language. But it soon became clear that cinema was a more productive institution that would quickly become the emblematic supplement to national identities that were restricted to cultural self-expression. The literary class soon recognised this potential and began to take an active part in the film industry. (Prasad 2009: 74)

Parallel to this direct address to the linguistic constituencies, a shift is identified in popular cinema that, by the 1950s, started moving away from the earlier conventions of the female star-oriented narratives towards a narrative structure in which the male star started gaining centrality. In the star-films of the 1950s in these three languages (i.e., Kannada, Tamil and Telugu), the male hero attained the status of being the representative of the linguistic community as well as the moral authority of the respective regions (Prasad 1999).[24]

[24] These textual strategies created avenues for the male stars in Telugu, Kannada and Tamil film industries to gain considerable popular appeal and authority that often spilled over to other domains including electoral politics. For various aspects of this, see Prasad 1999, 2009; Srinivas 2009. See Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2010) for an account on why this did not happen in Kerala. Radhakrishnan's essay traces the history of stardom in Malayalam cinema, arguing that in contrast to the case of other South Indian states where film stars have often been elected as political leaders, "[t]he transformation of star charisma into the field of electoral politics was impossible in a region like Kerala, as the former was being channelised into already existing structures of the Left, infusing leaders […] with star power" (Radhakrishnan 2010: 36).

In contrast, there is a general acceptance in the scholarship on Kerala that, compared to other south Indian states where mobilizations based on a common language became the most crucial facilitating factor for linguistic nationalism to develop and consolidate, nationalist mobilization based on language did not take on similar dimensions in Kerala during the 1950s. Scholars like Devika have argued that 'developmentalism', rather than language, was the uniting factor and the dominant discourse in the region's nationalist sentiments. Devika says:

> The major instrument with which [Malayalee nationalism] was to be accomplished was to be Development. This may seem to be in contradiction with the insistence of the Communist movement on the linguistic basis of State formation. Language was certainly not dismissed; however, while the place of Malayalam in imagining the new Malayalee was beyond dispute, it could only figure as an initial condition – quite unlike, for instance, the status of the Tamil tongue in Tamil nationalism. (Devika 2007: 17)[25]

Our analysis of *Neelakkuyil*, which was released close to the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956, also seems to provide a similar picture about what constituted the basis of Malayalee nationalism. The 'nationalist' exhortations in *Neelakkuyil* are quite evident from its narrative, though the strategies of addressing the audience as 'Malayalees' (thus invoking language as the uniting element of this nationalism) was not resorted to. Rather, a 'discourse of rational thinking',

[25] 'Developmentalism', in Devika's essay, stands for a discourse of rapid industrialization that the political leadership of the official Left envisaged during the time as essential for fashioning a 'modern Malayali culture', which included promoting "large-scale industries, scientifically reorganized and managed farms and forests and hydel projects, enlisting its labor force rationally in productive activities, zestfully promoting scientific research and technical education", etc. (Devika 2007: 17)

propagating secular egalitarian values and imagined as emanating from Communism, was envisaged as the dominant interpellative structure of Malayalee nationalism, if suggestions in *Neelakkuyil* are anything to go by. This discourse of 'rational thinking' formed the basis on which the Left imagined the region.[26] Shankaran Nair, played by P Bhaskaran, epitomized this discourse, like MGR represented the Tamil nation or Rajkumar became the icon of Kannada language in the popular imagination. The scene where Shankaran Nair – on behalf of the Dalits and by invoking 'the new laws' of the state – asks the conservative Namboodiri Brahmin to stop practicing untouchability, is noteworthy in this context (See Figures ii.1-ii.2).

Interestingly, as if in continuation with the unglamorous casting of Shankaran Nair's character, this unfaltering morally upright figure – which had the potentials of being redeployed as the moral authority of the region in similar ways the stars were cast in other South Indian language films of the period – was to disappear from the world of the socio-realist films in Malayalam. In contrast,

[26] This is not to contest Devika's claim about 'developmentalism' as the uniting nationalist sentiment of Malayali nationalism during the 1950s. Rather, this project is examining the Left's articulations during the time, considering *Neelakkuyil* as an example, in which 'the discourse of rational thinking' seems to have been proposed as the basis of Malayali nationalism. Nevertheless, if Devika's argument proposes that a developmental ideology emphasizing growth to be achieved through rapid industrialization as the dominant discourse of the time, our analysis of *Neelakkuyil* broadens this proposition by arguing that the emphasis was more on a modernism based on rational thinking and social egalitarianism. Also see Chapter III for the contradicting articulations coming from the Left quarters during the 1950s regarding development through industrialization.

the self-reforming high caste character played by Sathyan in the film was to be repeated in a number of later films as well.[27]

Figure ii.1

Figure ii.2

Figure ii.1-ii.2: Shankaran Nair (on the extreme left in both frames) invoking the principles of rational thinking and "the new laws" of the modern state, on behalf of Neeli, the Dalit woman (on the right extreme in *Figure ii.1*), to reprimand the conservative Namboodiri Brahmin. **Source:** *Neelakkuyil* (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954).

The 'sexual contract' and the nationalist consensus

One of the easily noticeable features about the socio-realist films is the importance that 'public spaces' like tea shops, streets etc., attain in these films as narrative backdrops. It would be worthwhile exploring the significance of the shift in the narrative backdrop from the 'familial' spaces of the studio socials to 'public spaces' in social realism – a major transition effected by the socio-realist films by the mid-1950s. In the studio socials, the primary narrative backdrop was

[27] For example, in films like *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (Ramu Kariat, 1961) and *Mooladhanam* (P Bhaskaran, 1969) Sathyan himself plays the high caste protagonist who undergoes certain self-transformation in the course of the narrative, after spending time with the lower castes/class.

the space of family – mostly that of the joint family which would accommodate the conjugal space constituted by the young protagonists. The narrative that unfolds in the "domestic" space, where women's roles were central, becomes a commentary on the larger society. The "family" functioned as a micro-social unit, and the moral of the story often served as a critique of the social hierarchy. The crisis within the family alluded to a larger social problem, and the narrative resolution of the crisis would often necessitate changes in the existing social order. The narratives would often revolve around, for example, the hardships that an estranged romantic couple from two diverse social backgrounds has to go through, the relationship between two brothers, or between the heroine who is from a lower social location and her scheming sister-in-law, etc. This then becomes a commentary or critique on the social hierarchies that is at the root of the crises in the family/the narrative. *Jeevithanowka*, as we saw from the discussions in the last chapter, is an example.

In *Neelakkuyil* and the later socio-realist films, the narrative backdrop shifts to 'public' spaces like the tea shop, the streets in the town, the court, the school, etc., which are defined by the presence of and exchanges between men from different communities. The narrative focus is mainly on the relations between communities (which constitute the 'social reality' that these films choose to portray, preferring it over a myth or the realms of affects and sentiments that circulate in, and define, the 'familial' space) unfolding in these 'public' spaces.

The narrative resolution depends on the negotiations between men (often of different communities). The suggestion is not that there are no sequences showing the 'familial' space in these films, but the events that unfold in the 'familial' spaces (defined by the presence of women) become subordinate to the events that unfold in the 'public spaces' and are often mere effects of them.

This aspect is often overlooked mainly because these films are understood only within the framework of realism and its central impulse to use 'real' outdoor locations for shooting, instead of studio sets. Hence, the shift in the narrative backdrop of the socio-realist films of the 1950s from family backdrops to 'public' spaces like tea shops and the streets is understood entirely as the result of the aesthetic compulsions of realism. However, it is striking that most of the 'outdoor' shots in *Neelakkuyil*, as well as many other films in this genre that came later in the 1950s in Malayalam, use studio sets to reconstruct locations like the tea shop in *Neelakkuyil,* the town and the streets in *Rarichan Enna Powran* ('Citizen Rarichan': P Bhaskaran, 1955)[28], etc. Shooting at *real locations* is not often a major concern in these films, whereas the prominence afforded to public spaces as narrative backdrops becomes a striking feature in them. This could lead us to examining the emphasis on the 'public spaces' in this aesthetic movement as a narrative prerequisite, instead of (or at least along with) understanding this as

[28] See Chapter III for an argument that proposes that *shooting in the controlled settings of studio floors was preferred over real location shooting* in *Raricha Enna Powran* for various reasons.

the effect of the realist cinema's preoccupation with real location shooting. The attempt here is to explore the possibilities of understanding the socio-realist films as tales of nationalist consensus based on caste egalitarianism and 'controlled' class revolution *achieved through a contract between men of different castes and communities*. This is not to argue that the 'family spaces' as the major narrative backdrop in the studio films of the early 1950s meant radical avenues for elaborating women's desires, but to signal at the transformation that takes place with social realism when questions of women's subjectivity (irrespective of the ideological forms in which they were elaborated and resolved) were kept aside almost completely, and the domain of exchanges between men (of different sections of population) took the center stage.

The rest of this chapter argues that it is these negotiations (between men) that sealed the social contract between various communities, ushering in the new Malayali nation. The questions and concerns about women's subjectivity were to be sidelined or muted almost completely for the time being. Here, it is also significant to recall the argument about Moithu's character taking on the dimensions of representing the subaltern, mass audience as the legitimate source of approval. That a male character stands in for the subaltern audience is not incidental. Moithu, and by extension (the male members of) the subaltern audience, are important links in the tale of the sexual contract between men of different communities, effecting a (sub)nationalist consensus. Importantly, this

sexual contract is also the site where the middle class, upper caste hero's position in the imminent social order is negotiated with 'the masses' who is represented by the Communist figure.

In the following pages, I intend to illustrate these points by examining some of the moments in *Neelakkuyil* where women characters play prominent roles in the narrative progression. We shall begin by taking a close look at the exchanges between Sreedharan Nair and his wife Nalini in their domestic space. The film has long sequences showing the guilt-ridden Sreedharan Nair striving hard to lead a normal married life. The presence of Mohan, his own son by the Dalit woman Neeli, is a constant reminder of his pre-marital affair with Neeli and the violence that he committed on the latter by rejecting her. However, he is not able to open up to anyone, including his wife Nalini. This leads to tensions between the couple, as Nalini insists that she needs to know why her husband is grief-stricken all the time. She begins to think that Sreedharan Nair is unhappy in the marriage because of her impotency. At this point, Sreedharan Nair gathers courage and tells Nalini that Mohan is his son by Neeli. He asks for forgiveness. Nalini's response is interesting to note. She says: "I can never forgive you. I am accursed. […] Cruelty to a child is something I cannot forgive. You threw your own child away. […] Neeli bore your child for ten months, and her life ended on the rail tracks. What wrong did that girl do to you? She loved you unconditionally. But then, she happened to be a 'Pulachi' [a Dalit]. You practiced

untouchability in your love too?" She then asks Sreedharan Nair to talk to Shankaran Nair, Mohan's foster father, and adopt the child.

The long sequences, elaborating Sreedharan Nair's moral dilemma and guilt, mainly serve the purpose of staging the drama of the upper caste protagonist's self-reformation before the mass audience. These sequences are replete with shots of the anguished Sreedharan Nair looking out of the window, making abstract philosophical points about his dilemma (See Figs. ii.3 & ii.4). For a long time, Nalini cannot make sense of the situation or comprehend what her husband says.

Figure ii.3 & Figure ii.4: The agonized Sreedharan Nair and his uncomprehending wife Nalini. **Source:** *Neelakkuyil* (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954).

The intention obviously is to present the repenting protagonist before the audience (who, unlike Nalini, possesses the knowledge about Sreedharan Nair's

affair with Neeli and how he rejected her), and to offer him avenues in the narrative to redeem himself through self-reformation. As someone who is outside this loop of exchanges – between Sreedharan Nair and the audience (gendered as male) – Nalini cannot make sense of her husband's prolonged existential angst. Seen in this context, it is interesting to note that Nalini's response to her husband's revelation about his pre-marital affair seems to be totally framed by the film's central theme of caste egalitarianism, which subsumes and renders irrelevant all other aspects of the situation, including the ramifications of Sreedharan Nair's pre-marital affair in the life of the couple. It, then, should not strike us as strange that the *only* factor what pains Nalini is how Sreedharan Nair rejected Neeli because she was a Dalit (thus practicing "untouchability in his love"); the fact that her husband had a pre-marital affair in which he has a child never comes up at all in this exchange. In a narrative preoccupied with the tale of caste egalitarianism that needs to be achieved through a social contract between men of different castes, there is no space for the recognition or elaboration of the issues in the domestic space, and by extension, women's subjectivity itself. The attempt was *not* to suggest that the narrative privileges the issue of caste discrimination over the subjectivity of women characters, but to show that even the actions that unfold in the (private) space constituted by the heterosexual couple function mostly as important links in the larger narrative preoccupation – the intense drama of the high caste

protagonist's self reformation before the masses – where the roles assigned to women are largely insignificant.

Seen in this context, it is important that we understand the Dalit woman Neeli – one of the central characters after whom the film is named – as an important narrative device that allows the film to effortlessly stage the tale of caste egalitarianism to be achieved through the contract between men of different communities/castes. Neeli is not the film's attempt to represent the Dalit woman, her desires and distresses, etc., nor is she an important link in the emergent social contract despite her prominence in the narrative. The primary function of Neeli's character is to *feminize* the Dalit community, a crucial strategy that enables the film, on the one hand, to elaborate the issue of caste discrimination in a controlled manner so as to contain the radical energies that such narratives could unleash, and on the other hand, to institute the ideal Communist figure to represent and speak for the Dalits. As a film that subscribes to the social imaginary where *only adult men* are conceived as endowed with the agency of political deliberation and action, the Dalit protagonist's femininity was a crucial representational strategy for achieving the terms of the social contract that the narrative sought to effect. Feminizing the Dalit community was a way of silencing it, so that the Communist figure can *represent* the former. It then sets the stage for the final negotiations between the Communist radical (who comes endowed with Moithu's approval) and the self-reforming high caste protagonist,

which also brings the narrative to a closure. It would be useful if we discuss these aspects by first taking a look at how Neeli's character has been understood in film studies scholarship.

Jenny Rowena (2002, 2008) has argued that films like *Neelakkuyil*, which puts forth a pseudo-radical message on the question of caste, in fact reproduced the caste/gender hegemonies. Pointing towards the structures of 'casteist patriarchy' built into the social realism of *Neelakkuyil*, Rowena argues that the narrative of the film "does not accept the Dalit woman into its fold" and that it "lets her die helpless by the roadside" (Rowena 2002: 35). She writes:

> Here, the question of caste/gender (as in most other social-realist films of the period) is not taken up from the perspective of the person for whom it [the power structures of caste and gender] is most problematic – the Dalit woman. A truly radical narrative about caste/gender inequality would have represented Neeli's story from her perspective [...]. The purpose here is neither a radical cinema nor a true representation of the caste/gender problem. [...] [T]he entire narrative is represented from the upper caste man's perspective, for whom the discourse on caste/gender equality becomes a means to establishing his superior identity. In fact, it is by assimilating the radical discourse on caste/gender with pseudo-radical films such as this that [the upper caste man] is able to posit himself at the center of Malayalee progressiveness and culture. (ibid: 36)

For Rowena, *Neelakkuyil* becomes problematic since it is not told in the Dalit woman's perspective and it abandons her. She also adds that "there is a near

absence of Dalit woman in the entire history of Malayalam cinema" before and after *Neelakkuyil* (ibid: 35).[29] Similarly, discussing the distinct modes in which Neeli, the Dalit woman, and the upper caste woman Nalini are portrayed in the film, C S Venkiteswaran says:

> While Neeli enters Sreedharan Nair's world from the outside, seeking refuge, Nalini belongs to an honourable taravad, an alliance with it being considered an honour by Nair. While Neeli is always shown in the open, frolicking and working in the exteriors, Nalini is firmly placed within her home first, and then after marriage in the new home. While Sreedharan is a playful lover to Neeli, he is a proper husband to Nalini. While one is all sensual and inviting, the other is controlled and prohibitive. (Venkiteswaran 2006)

While these critical observations invite our attention to some of the dominant representational strategies of portraying Dalit women in Malayalam cinema, they do not try to explain the logic behind placing the Dalit woman as one of the central characters in *Neelakkuyil* (whereas there is a near absence of Dalit women characters in the representational horizon of Malayalam cinema before and after this film). That the film's intention is not to tell the story of untouchability from the Dalit woman's perspective, and that its representational registers fix the Dalit woman with certain characteristics, are rather obvious. To my mind, an

[29] These observations appears in Rowena's persuasive thesis on the Malayalam comedy films of the late 1980s and the 1990s, while discussing the socio realist film of the 1950s that played a crucial role in setting the dominant aesthetic standards of Malayalam cinema.

overwhelming focus on how *Neelakkuyil*'s narrative marginalized Neeli obscures the crucial question: why is the Dalit woman a central character in the first place?

In order to understand this aspect, I suggest that we have to analyze the choice of the Dalit woman as a strategy that enables the film to elaborate the theme of caste egalitarianism as a contract between men of different castes/communities. The dominant structures of representation in which cultural forms – whether novels, dramas or films – portray only *adult men* as politically agential (capable of deliberating on social issues, enunciating political positions, etc.), determines this choice. Other categories like women, children, the youth, the aged, etc., are conceived as vulnerable, less agential and incapable of deliberating on social and political issues. The latter categories often need nurturing and patrons.

In *Neelakkuyil*, one can notice that the Dalit characters belong to the latter category of women, children and the aged. The two prominent Dalit characters in the film are Neeli, the Dalit woman, and Mohan, her son. Using these two characters, the film foregrounds, in a compelling manner, a number of issues specific to being a lower caste, especially by portraying the humiliation they have to face from the upper castes in the village. The school scene, where Mohan's classmates try to humiliate him by calling him 'a *pulachi*'s son', is a striking example. In this moving scene, the film, using close-up shots and a poignant background score, tries to generate sympathy from the audience towards the

Dalit child. One just has to imagine how the scenario would have changed radically, if the film replaced the Dalit child with an adult Dalit man, and how difficult it would have been for the film to contain the radical political energies that such a scenario would have released (*given the agential position that the dominant social imaginary attributes to the adult man, as opposed to a child or a woman*).[30] This 'reducing' of Dalit characters to categories of women and children – two categories which, in the dominant cultural imagination, are conceived as non-agential – enables the narrative to render the Dalits as voiceless who needs to be represented by the communist figure. It is interesting to note that in the film, Neeli never articulates her rejection as an instance of the practice of untouchability; she does not have the enunciating capabilities to articulate her condition as part of a larger social issue. It is Shankaran Nair, the radical Communist figure, who is endowed with the authority to *represent* the issue of untouchability in the language of rational politics; he is the custodian of the Dalit child Mohan after Neeli's death; he is the object of admiration for Moithu.

Thus, it is with this Communist figure that Sreedharan Nair has to negotiate in the end so that he can redeem himself from the guilt of practicing untouchability (not with Neeli or Mohan). Towards the end of the film, when Sreedharan Nair

[30] As we have learned from the scholarly works in the areas of caste, community, gender and class, it is problematic to suggest that *all* adult men would be afforded a more agential position in the representational scheme of a film or a novel than *all* women, irrespective of the caste/community/class locations of these categories. My attempt here is just to point towards the hierarchical structures within the dominant cultural imagination that imagines men as more agential than women, 'other things being equal'.

falls on his feet and admits that Mohan is his son, Shankaran Nair gives a long, moving account of how the whole village discriminated against Neeli and Mohan because they were untouchables. He even punishes the repenting Sreedharan Nair by refusing to hand over the custody of Mohan to the latter, thus bringing the narrative to a momentary crisis as the latter cannot think of anything else but to end his life. In the end, Shankaran Nair hands over the Dalit child Mohan to Sreedharan Nair, thus offering him a chance at redemption. Significantly, it is this negotiation between the Communist figure, legitimized and nominated by Moithu who represents the mass audience, and the self-reforming Nair protagonist, that brings the narrative to a closure.[31]

Women's cinema

Significantly, one clearly recognizable genre that was emerging and getting consolidated by the late 1950s and during the 1960s was the 'women's cinema', which included mainly romance melodramas and a few 'tearjerkers'. These films

[31] We may also recall Carole Pateman's famous argument that the social contract, which is the basis of polities like nation-states, is dependent on a prior sexual contract – a contract not between the man and the women who form the couple, but between the men who all agree to subordinate themselves to an overarching authority (of the state, in case of nation-states); the family and the woman becomes the property of the man. The authority of the modern state derives from this dual contract (Pateman 1988: 2). The term 'sexual contract', in this project, is borrowed from Pateman. However, the project is not using Pateman's formulation – which indicates the conditions of bourgeois hegemony and the emergence of modern state – to apply it directly to our context. In the case of *Neelakkuyil*, the sexual contract between men in the film's narrative symbolically stands for the contract between various castes and communities, represented by men, in the region. This sexual contract between men in the narrative, leading to the social contract between various castes and communities in the region, is negotiated by the Communist figure who represents the region / nation and its people (especially the subaltern sections), and whose paramount authority is acknowledged by all.

dealt with a number of themes and issues related to women's desires in many ways. Here, the term 'women's cinema' does not mean 'cinema by/of women'. Rather, it refers to the cluster of films that tried to address women as a separate audience segment by foregrounding and elaborating certain narrative elements and affective realms which were considered as directly appealing to this audience segment, and were left largely unaddressed by social realism. While Prem Nazir epitomized the romance melodramas in this category, Padmini, Ragini, Sheela and Sarada – the leading actresses of the industry during the 1950s and the 1960s – came to be known for their roles in the tearjerkers during this period.

The romance melodramas mostly dealt with the theme of an estranged romantic couple or the love between protagonists from disparate socials backgrounds. A number of these films drew from pulp fiction, especially the *painkili* literature – a term used to refer to the genre of titillating and sentimental romance novels, considered as catering mostly to women readers. The genre acquired this name from the title of Muttathu Varkey's famous novel *Padatha Painkili* published in 1955, and was made into a film in 1957. Muttathu Varkey's novels, and *painkili* romances in general, are devaluated and stigmatized in literary circles mainly for their sentimentality and sensual content. Udaya, Merryland, Associated Pictures and other producers made a number of films based on the stories of Muttathu

Varkey[32], Ponkunnam Varkey[33] and E J Kanam[34] – writers generally known for their *painkili* novels and scripts – in which Prem Nazir played the roles of the young romantic, the dissenting younger son in a feudal joint family, etc.[35] (See also Chapter IV). The theme of *Padatha Painkili* (P Subrahmaniam, 1957), one of the biggest Nazir-starrer during the time, would be useful to look at. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* describes the film's plot:

> Marriage melodrama around dowry problems. Thankachan (Nazir) wants to marry the poor Chinnnamma (Kumari) but his rich father wants a big dowry for the eligible young man. Thankachan's marriage is arranged with Lucy, daughter of a millionaire, on the same day on which Chinnamma is scheduled to marry a poor worker from a *beedi* factory. Lucy, however, resolves the matter by becoming a nun, leaving the lovers to marry. One of the first major films featuring the scripts of Muttathu Varkey, in the paingili brand of popular fiction in Malayalam that later also influenced Prem Nazir's screen persona. (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen 1999: 327)

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[32] Muttathu Varkey wrote the story and screenplay for films like *Padatha Paingili* (P Subrahmaniam, 1957), *Mariyakkutty* (P Subrahmaniam, 1958), *Poothali* (P Subrahmaniam, 1960), *Christmas Rathri* (P Subrahmaniam, 1961), *Jnanasundari* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1961), *Snapaka Yohannan* (P Subrahmaniam, 1963), *Ina Pravukal* (Kunchacko, 1965), *Sthanarthi Saaraamma* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1966), *Velutha Kathreena* (Sasikumar, 1968), etc.

[33] Ponkunnam Varkey began his career in films by scripting *Navalokam* (V Krishnan, 1951), an early socio-realist film in Malayalam. A number of his plays were staged by the KPAC. He wrote the screenplay and dialogues for films like *Ashadeepam* (G R Rao, 1953), *Snehaseema* (S S Rajan, 1954), *Bharya* (Kunchacko, 1962), *Nithyakanyaka* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1963), *Sathyabhama* (M S Mani, 1963), *Susheela* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1963), *Kalanjukittiya Thankam* (R S Puttanna, 1964).

[34] E J Kanam was a novelist who entered the film industry by writing the story for *Bharya* (Kunchacko, 1962) and *Kalayum Kaaminiyum* (P Subrahmaniam, 1963). He wrote the dialogues for films like *Bharthavu* (M Krishnan Nair, 1964), *Kudumbini* (Sasikumar & P A Thomas, 1964) and *Adhyapika* (P Subrahmaniam, 1968).

[35] Director J D Thottan is another figure who tried to address this segment during the period, often by associating with these writers. His films include *Sthree Hridayam* (1960), *Kalyana Photo* (1965), *Anadha* (1970), *Vivaham Swargathil* (1970), *Gangasangamam* (1970), *Vivahasammanam* (1971), *Omana* (1972).

Considered one of the most handsome men in the industry during his time, Nazir came to be known as Malayalam cinema's first romantic hero. (See also Figures ii.5-ii.8) Even when he acted in the socio-realist films with explicitly political themes, Nazir brought his romantic star persona to these films. Thus, in *Mooladhanam* (Capital: P Bhaskaran, 1969), Nazir plays the character of a revolutionary who falters before romance, whereas the character played by Sathyan is the unwavering radical figure who does not succumb to emotions, and, 'like a true revolutionary', refuses to meet his wife and children when he is in hiding. In *Anubhavangal Palichakal* (Experiences and Mistakes: K S Sethumadhavan, 1971), Nazir plays the role of the labour contractor who covets the wife of the union leader – a mobilizing martyr figure played by Sathyan.

Interestingly, Prem Nazir's histrionics (typical of melodrama) was to become an object of laughter through mimicry programs, a major entertainment form in Kerala since the late 1980s, performed mostly by all-men troupes. Imitating the acting mannerisms associated with Nazir while courting his heroine became one of the inevitable items in these mimicry programs. Along with all the ingredients of romance, the *painkili* genre is also known for the liberal messages of social transformation packaged in the narrative.[36]

[36] For example, in *Gandhi Nagar Second Street* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1986), a young Christian boy asks the Hindu girl next door (who is also the daughter of a *painkili* novelist) with whom he is in love: "Why can't you love me? I know you are a Hindu and I am a Christian. But in your father's novels, lovers always break these barriers, don't they?" (Cited in Rowena 2002)

One of the most striking examples of the 'tearjerkers' would be *Adhyapika* (P Subrahmaniam, 1968), a major box office hit. The screen adaptation of E J Kanam's novel of the same title, the film's plot closely resembled that of Ritwik Ghatak's Bengali melodrama *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960). Padmini played the role of a schoolteacher – the lead character – who had to sacrifice her life and desires to support her family, and ultimately succumbs to tuberculosis.

An examination of various aspects of the 'women's cinema' and its connections with Prem Nazir's stardom is beyond the scope of this project. However, as a concluding note to this chapter on the Left's interventions in cinema, we can put forth certain broad hypotheses in the light of the observations made above. The Left and its aesthetic project of social realism conceived the realms of rational politics and the relations between communities (mediated by the exchanges and contracts between men) as the *only* constitutive elements of 'social reality'; consequently, it marginalized or delegitimized the affects and energies of romance and sentiments, perceived as circulating in the 'familial' spaces and as appealing mainly to women. The radically commercial film industry that emerged in Malayalam by the late 1950s, facilitated by the local studios like Udaya and Merryland, commodified and addressed the subjectivity of women in various forms, offering avenues of covert gratification of their desires and anxieties. Understood in this manner, we can approach the women's cinema of

the period as oppositional articulations to the cultural agenda proposed by social realism of the Left.

Figure ii.5: Prem Nazir with L Vijayalakshmi in *Jnanasundari* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1961). **Source**: *Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema* (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).

Figure ii.6: Prem Nazir and Ragini in *Kalayum Kaminiyum* (P Subrahmaniam, 1963). **Source**: *Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema* (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).

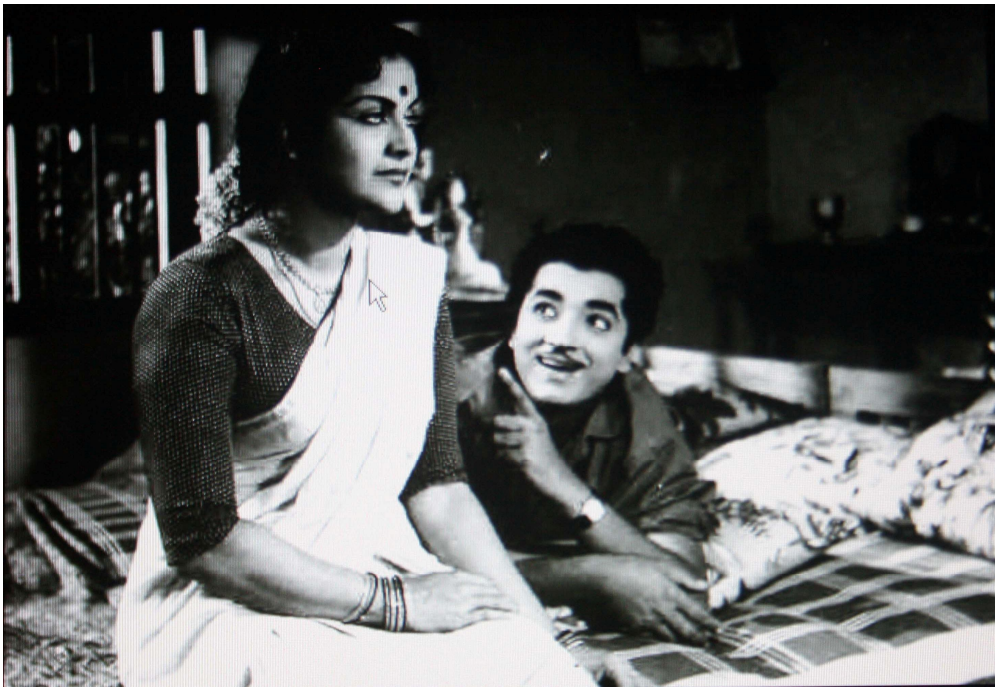

Figure ii.7: Prem Nazir and Miss Kumari in *Susheela* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1963). **Source**: *Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema* (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).

Figure ii.8: Prem Nazir and Sheela in *Ramanan* (D M Pottakkadu, 1967). **Source**: *Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema* (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).

Chapter III

Early 'Art Cinema', its Subjects and the Modes of Spatial Imagination

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> Japanese films mesmerized the audience with their artistic brilliance. […] The Russian films, despite the annoyingly evident propagandist impulses, contained supreme values of art. Perhaps, only the USSR can produce a grand film like 'In the Circus Arena'. However, Cecil B De Mille's 'The Greatest Show on Earth' was far more appealing, mainly because of James Stewart's performance as the buffoon. […] Indian films like 'Awara', 'Babla' [etc], have been appreciated by the internationally acclaimed filmmakers as great works of art. The International Film Festival [of 1952] gives hopes that Indian films can have a global market.
>
> (Cynic; *Mathrubhoomy Weekly,* 25 January, 1953: 93)

> All of us would want to watch good films. However, our films, though made in plenty, constantly disappoint the intellectuals and the thinking people. […] Films like 'Fall of Berlin' (Soviet), 'The Trap' (Czech), 'Colony Underground' (Hungary) are examples of how cinema is being used in East Europe and Soviet countries to extol human progress. […] Cinema in even small countries like Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary and Vietnam has undergone incredible transformations.
>
> (P A Seythu Mohammad; *Vidyabhivardhini*, January, 1952)

> The well-wishers and admirers of arts, and the artists especially, would be among the first to feel elated about the formation of the state of Kerala. A true artist can imagine not just a united Kerala, but also a united India and even a united world. Art is universal.
>
> (Editorial; *Thirasheela*, November, 1956)

The middle class and the literati in Kerala have had an ambiguous relationship to cinema ever since the medium became one of the major forms of commercial entertainment in the region. After an initial period of stigmatizing, by the late 1940s, the middle class in the region began positing itself as the patrons of 'a

cinema for the region'. This patronage was largely fuelled by the cultural and economic anxieties arising in the context of linguistic nationalism. The popularity of Tamil (or Madras-made) films in the region was a matter of grave concern since these films were considered as culturally alien products resulting in moral degradation and economic drain in the region. The call, evidently, was to make concerted efforts to develop an indigenous film industry by setting up production units in the region and making films that reflect the region's culture.

As Udaya and Merryland studios started making films by the late 1940s as local production centres, their attempts were endorsed by the middle class and the critics in the region, as is evident in the reports and reviews that appeared in the newspapers during the time, despite the general acceptance that these films were of inferior technical quality and did not differ much from the Madras films in terms of the content and form. A reviewer wrote about *Nirmala* (P V Krishna Iyer, 1948), one of the first talkies in Malayalam:

> The beautiful landscape of Kerala, the scenes from a historic festival, the navy and the Cochin port, touching scenes from the lives of fishermen, the portrayal of a pure romantic love without resorting to vulgarity, the blunders of ultra-modern young men, naughty children and servants – *Nirmala* has it all. […] Some might complain that *Nirmala* is not technically perfect when compared to the Hindi, Tamil and Telugu films that we often get to watch. But *it goes without saying that it is not proper to compare a Malayalam film with films produced with huge budgets, in studios equipped with the latest technological facilities*, and with the assistance of directors and

> actors who draw huge amounts as remuneration. […] Those who wish a good future for Malayalam cinema should promote *Nirmala*. (K J Augustine, *Malayala Manorama*, 7 June, 1948; emphasis added)

These local studios had to work within the parameters of the cultural expectations that the literati placed on them as well as the industrial terms set by the Madras-based studios. They strived to meet these expectations by making products of *bricolage* that would incorporate attractions and ingredients catering to the masses as well as the middle class, thus addressing a socially *mixed audience*. The early socio-realist films of the Left, with specific agendas of cultural politics, also conceived the masses as the primary addressee, even while catering to the desires of the middle class at many levels. These circumstances threw up a fresh set of concerns, now beginning to be expressed mainly in terms of the demand for aestheticizing cinema to transform it as a medium suitable for modern artistic practices appealing to the literati and the critics. In other words, the middle class started articulating the demand/desires for a cinema which would be different from what the masses relish, in terms of the thematic content, audience address and artistic motives.

Thus, towards the mid-1950s, there is a discernible shift in the commentaries appearing in the print media, from the conventions of positing the Tamil cinema as the external factor encroaching upon the cultural and economic spheres of

Malayalees, towards an anxiety to establish a distinction between the writers and the habitual cinema-goers. To illustrate my point, let me quote from two articles that appeared in the early 1950s. The major concern for both the writers is the undisciplined audience in the cinema halls. Here is an excerpt from an article written by Chakyattu Padmavathi Amma in 1950:

> […] It will be really appreciated if the men folk, who come to the cinema halls with all other intentions but to watch the film, learn a few lessons from the women audience and behave in a disciplined manner. What can we say about those who gather outside the cinema halls, boo and jeer, and leave the theatre after a few minutes into the film? Cinema halls, these days, have been monopolized by drunkards, those who are distressed with their domestic brawls, the 'imitation' college boys, and a few oldies who often doze off (*The Talkie*, April 1950: 24-25).

Another article titled "Watching Cinema is an Art", written in 1952 by Moorkoth Kunjhappa, a prominent literary figure of the time, described the scene in the cinema halls in the following manner:

> […] For film viewing to become a pleasant experience, the audience in the cinema hall also needs to be good. […] In our case, usually people enter the cinema halls only after the show has started, because only then can they cause inconvenience to others! […] Once they find a seat, they put their legs on the chairs in the front row […], light a *beedi* and start smoking. […] People need to know that they are not supposed to talk loudly inside the cinema hall. The drunkards keep talking all through the film, and some would even shout out what is going to happen in the coming scenes. (*Cinemadeepam*, 1952, Vol 2, No 2: 35-37)

In these accounts, there is a striking 'other-ing' of the habitual film-goers – perceived as lacking in discipline – which means that in both cases, even when the writers are part of the crowd that they are describing, the mode of writing isolates and distances the writers from it, and places them in an elevated position. Such discussions identified certain categories of people as the regular audience for cinema, who needed reforming and disciplining. The literati, on the other hand, conceived itself as the disciplined, contemplative audience, 'forced' to watch films that the industry produces for the masses with the only intention of making profit, etc. Among other reforms, the critics proposed artistic and avant-garde practices of the medium to appeal to this emerging middle class audience.

As suggested above, these articulations were part of the writing elites maneuvering new modes of distinguishing their engagement with cinema from that of the masses, in the context of the studio films of the early 1950s as well as the early socio-realist films seeking to address a socially mixed audience, despite the distinct aesthetic and representational strategies that differentiate these two models. The exhortations to maintain a distance from the familiar themes of popular cinema as well as to make political use of the medium, to follow the impulses of realism, to portray 'the issues plaguing the society' on screen (thus linking film-making and viewing with a certain intellectual contemplation rather than 'crass entertainment' and profit-making), to adopt from the technical and

aesthetic innovations happening in world cinema, etc., formed part of the new set of guidelines proposed by the literati before the filmmakers to evolve visual registers and thematic content suited for aestheticizing cinema.

Moreover, the textual strategies were expected to constantly reproduce the faith in the viewers' ability to arrive at meanings on their own. One can also argue that this spectatorial subjectivity – that of the (middle class) contemplative viewer – was constantly being constructed in these films as well, through various textual and narrative strategies, often until the last frame/shot, as much as it was the precondition for the artistic engagements with cinema.[1] One may also recall Pandian's (1996) argument about the Tamil context during the 1950s when the cultural elites tried to differentiate their engagement with cinema from that of the subalterns by "deploying notions of realism, ideology of uplift and a series of binaries which recuperated within the cinematic medium itself, the dichotomy of high culture and low culture" (951).

[1] It would be interesting in this context to look at the ending of *Newspaper Boy* (P Ramadas, 1955). The film ends with the title 'The Beginning', instead of the conventional use of 'The End'. P Ramadas, the director, has repeatedly referred to this and said that when the film was released, some of the viewers refused to leave the cinema hall thinking that the film was yet to begin! (Ramadas 2008: 78). Irrespective of the truth value of this account, it is clear that the pleasure one gains out of cultural differentiation – by constructing/recounting the instance of a section of the audience 'not quite getting the point' – adds to the spectatorial pleasures of watching an 'art film'. In that sense, one could argue that the spectator subject of the 'art cinema' is very often an effect deriving from cultural differentiation (as well), as much as the result of the film's textual and representational strategies.

Art Cinema and its Universal Humanitarian Subject

The anxieties of cultural differentiation were not the only factors that determined the attempts to maneuver artistic practices of cinema. As the passages quoted in the beginning of this chapter would suggest, by the early 1950s, filmmakers and critics identified cinema as a modern medium that traverses regional boundaries and appeals to audiences all over the world; it could bind people together, across barriers, over universal values of social progress and humanitarianism. The period of the 1950s bears much significance in this regard as a period when, along with the birth of new nationalities, humanitarianism as an influential ideology started gaining ground across the world, especially with the memories of the World Wars, the violent revolutions and the centuries of colonialism remaining fresh in many minds. It would not be far-fetched to argue that one of the proposed desirable objectives of all 'good art' was to constitute and address this sublime subject of universal humanitarianism that would circulate beyond the boundaries of nationalities and regions. Besides, the wide circulation of many avant-garde and neo-realist films from different parts of the globe during this period made accessible various models of experiments in cinema to filmmakers and the intelligentsia in India.

The 'universal humanitarian subject' – the ideal spectator of the art cinema – was not conceived as someone who has transcended his/her regional, national

affiliations, but such primary identifications did not stand in the way of the realization of the subject-position constructed around the humanitarian ideals of egalitarianism and global fraternity. The issues of the regional polity were to be rendered in the language of universal humanitarianism, thus often consciously distancing the 'artistic' practice of cinema from the directly political / propagandist use of the medium (like in the interventions of the Indian People's Theatre Association and other Left-affiliated institutions and artists in India). A focus on the poor and the exploited was to become the essential feature of the 'art cinema' in India by the 1950s, primarily catering to a bourgeoning middle class audience whose anxieties were often transposed onto the former and articulated as their concerns.

Discussing *Newspaper Boy* (P Ramadas, 1955) and *Rarichan Enna Powran* ('Citizen Rarichan': P Bhaskaran, 1956; henceforth *REP*), this chapter discusses some of the attempts, and their specificities, that tried to respond to these new sets of sensibilities and desires put forth by the critics and the literati in the region. It argues that the strategies of deploying the urban milieu as the narrative backdrop, and using the figure of the child protagonist as a key narrative device, allowed these films to focus on, and elaborate the tales of, the poor and the oppressed in ways that suit the gaze of the middle class viewer. The affective energies of melodramatic pathos were blended with the imperatives of realist representational strategies and avant-garde devices like montage, in this cinema,

to narrate tales of human suffering from the vantage point of the middle class's anxieties about social transformations. While *REP,* a film from the same team that made *Neelakkuyil*, can be considered as the Left's attempt to address the emerging middle class audience segment, *Newspaper Boy* was an 'experimental' film by a group of young enthusiasts inspired by the international neo-realist cinema and different strands of parallel cinema in India, especially in Bengali cinema.

The meager size of the middle class audience as a market segment, and the absence of any ready source of narratives to adopt or draw from, were the two major challenges before the filmmakers who tried to address this niche market. Most often, commercial considerations were kept aside or were not given much importance in this aesthetic project. At the thematic level, attempts were being made to evolve new narrative forms distinct from the familiar plot of family-romance (as in the studio films) as well as the tales of rural conflicts between the feudal lords and the mobilized rural peasantry – a recurrent theme in the KPAC plays. In the two films mentioned above, we can identify a shift towards deploying urban spaces as the prominent narrative backdrop and an anxiety to traverse through and document the urban landscape.

The urban backdrop enabled these narratives to focus on and elaborate issues of poverty, marginalization and destitution in universal registers of class

differences, evoking affects of melancholy and patronising sympathy. They also incorporated a number of textual strategies to produce a distance from the then-existing popular cinematic traditions. One such strategy was to move away from the tradition of giving thematic centrality to romance. A greater emphasis on linear narrative progression, the absence of comedy tracks, the casting of amateur artists in central roles, a considerable emphasis on real location shooting, the deployment of suggestive visual registers, creative use of the effects of light and shadow, a relatively low budget, etc., were some of the other significant hallmarks of these films.

Rarichan Enna Powran, the middle class audience and the Left

For the artists and filmmakers associated with the Left, shaping an *artistic* practice of cinema, addressing the 'contemplative' spectator, seem to have meant evolving narratives different from the familiar plots of the KPAC plays, and the socio-realist films like *Navalokam* and *Neelakkuyil,* defined by their mobilizational and pedagogical intent. This was partly because 'the masses' – the object of the Left mobilizational rhetoric – were not conceived as the intended audience for this cinema, and partly because this movement sought to place more (or at least equal) emphasis on artistic values than on the art's social responsibility, though these boundaries and binaries always remained porous and contingent.

REP, thus, registers the attempt to evolve new idioms of progressive art based on a suspicion of market economy and industrialization, as rural radicalism – the foundation on which the Communist Party extended its popularity in Kerala since the 1930s[2] and also the middle class Left intelligentsia's favourite object of fascination in plays and literature – was reaching its exhausting limits. The narrative begins in a village where the Dalit boy Rarichan (Master Latheef) and his father Chozhi (J A R Anand) make a living by pressing oil manually. In an attempt to oust the Dalit family from his land, the local landlord destroys Chozhi's house by setting fire to it. In retaliation and out of despair, Chozhi kills the landlord. The court gives Chozhi a death sentence for the crime. These circumstances drive Rarichan's mother into insanity and the family out into the streets. After his mother dies on the street, Rarichan moves to the town where he is given refuge by Biyathumma (Mrs K P Raman Nair), a Muslim widow who runs a tea shop. From this moment, Rarichan's gaze is deployed in the film to ponder over various aspects of life in the town – the kinds of business people are engaged in, the collectives that are formed, the romances that sprout between people, the divide between the rich and the poor, etc.

Parallel to this, the film tells the story of the romance between Khadeeja (Vilasini), the young lady in the Muslim household, and Mohammadali (Padmanabhan), who is from a wealthier family. Mohammadali's father Seydali

[2] See Menon 1994: 159-89.

(K P Ummar) opposes the alliance, but eventually concedes on the condition that Biyathumma should arrange a huge quantity of gold as dowry if the marriage is to take place. Seeing that the alliance is falling off because Biyathumma is unable to arrange the dowry, Rarichan decides to steal. He filches the purse of the assistant to the landlord who had harassed his family in the village. Later, seeing that an innocent boy is being held for the crime, Rarichan admits to the crime before the Police. When brought before the court, the advocate (Ramu Kariat) defends Rarichan saying he was not a criminal by nature, but circumstances had forced him to steal. Finally, the court sends Rarichan to the juvenile home.

The rural landscape, shrouded with caste/feudal violence and the fights over land, pushes the narrative to a *cul-de-sac* in the beginning of the film itself: Chozhi, the Dalit tenant, gets a death sentence for killing the landlord, his wife goes mad and dies, Rarichan is orphaned and pushed out into the street and poverty. Some of these scenarios were the staple backdrops for the plays staged during the 1940s and the 1950s by the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC). The KPAC plays used the backdrop of rural feudal violence as the ideal setting to unravel narratives of mass mobilization employing the rhetoric of working class solidarity and popular slogans like 'land to the tiller'. At the social level, the movements by the tenant cultivators, with the active support of the Communist Party, had succeeded in bringing about various legislations since the early 20th Century, introducing ceiling on the ownership of land and granting the tenant

cultivators ownership rights to the land. Eventually, the politics based on mobilizing the rural peasantry around the issue of entitlement to land reached its culmination with the introduction of the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill of 1957 by Kerala's first ministry which was led by the Communist Party. Meanwhile, it was also becoming increasingly clear that the agricultural sector could not be expanded any further, and rapid industrialization was seen as the solution for issues like educated unemployment, pressure on land, etc.[3] The ministry, led by E M S Namboodiripad, adopted a policy of actively encouraging capitalist industrial initiatives in the state. The government invited private entrepreneurs to invest in the state by promising them an industrial-friendly environment, it introduced the Industrial Relations Bill[4] to ensure cordial relations between the workers and the management of various private enterprises, and the Left leadership appealed to the workers' unions in the state to cooperate with capitalist industrialization and contribute to the development of the state.[5]

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[3] The Economic Review (1959) prepared by the Bureau of Economic Studies, Kerala, noted: "While for the whole of India as much as 70 per cent of the working force belongs to the agriculture sector, the proportion for Kerala is only 51 per cent. The proportion of workers engaged in non-agricultural production is 22 per cent for Kerala and 11.7 per cent for the whole of India. The figures are paradoxical; for one generally associates higher proportion of workers in agriculture with a less industrialized economy, and Kerala is certainly industrially more backward than the rest of India. This paradoxical statistical feature arises from the exceptionally high population pressure on land. The pressure is so high that it is impossible for agriculture to support more than 51 per cent of the population. (…) The per capita extent of cultivated land in Kerala is among the lowest in India. Already in 1921 it was only 53 cents; now it is less than 30 cents" (Economic Review 1959; Ch. 1: 4-5). (The report is available online: *www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/eco_index.htm* ; accessed on 26-08-2011).

[4] A copy of the Bill is available online: *www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/pdf/ind_rel_bl.pdf*

[5] In 1957, while addressing the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the All India Trade Union Congress, the trade union wing of the Communist Party, the then chief minister EMS Namboodiripad said:

Paradoxically, this was also the time a cynical attitude towards industrialization and capitalist modernization strongly manifested itself in the cultural interventions of the Left. A distrust of industrialization and urban economy was an important underlying sentiment in most of the 'progressive' literature, KPAC plays and the films made by Left-associated artists during this time. *REP* is a clear example. Importantly, most often, the critiques mounted in these literatures, plays and films against rapid industrialization and capitalist modernization were fundamentally based on the middle class's cultural anxieties (the fears about the moral depreciation that industrialization would cause, the apprehensions about the social restructuring that would ensue, etc), and often fell back on culturalist assumptions about the region as well as 'western modernity'.[6]

On the one hand, *such apprehensions were largely middle class anxieties, displaced on to the subaltern sections of the society and articulated as the latter's concerns*. On the other, the suspicion towards the city and its economy were identified as rallying points around which new visual registers could be developed and a

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"Without the active cooperation of the management and workers, without pooling together the resources of the state and private individuals for retaining and expanding the existing industrial base, without launching new industrial undertakings, the working class of the state has no redemption" (*www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/policy.htm* ; accessed on 26-08-2011).

[6] See Kaviraj (2007) for an elaboration on the points of distinctiveness between the interpretation of 'the city' in the popular imagination and in the 'self-consciously artistic aesthetic' of modern literature in India, by contrasting the famous song '*Yeh hai Bombay meri jaan'* sung by Mohammed Rafi and Geeta Dutt from the Hindi film *CID* (Raj Khosla, 1956) with some examples from the modern poetry, influenced by Marxist thoughts, about urban experience.

humanitarian-liberal Leftist discourse could be mounted, from the vantage point of the middle class's culturalist assumptions and anxieties, enabling the cultural imagination to overcome the narrative impasse that the conflicts in the rural landscape lead to. This Left-liberal discourse was developed out of a rhetoric that sought to establish rather rigid oppositions between rapid industrialization and humanitarian values, urban economy and social welfare, western modernity and ethical life, etc. An already prevailing sense of antagonism towards the urban economy among the (upper caste) middle class, during the time of rapid socio-economic transformations, made it possible for the filmmakers to deploy 'the disastrous tale of development' as an ideal narrative trope for the contemplative spectator of the artistic, neo-realist cinema.

A discussion on some moments from the film *REP* would be helpful for the narrative that I am constructing here. Soon after he is pushed into the streets, Rarichan reaches the gates of an oil factory looking for a job. The security guard at the gate tells him not only that there are no new jobs in the factory, but that a lot of existing workers are to lose their jobs when new machines arrive. The suggestion is clear – industrialization based on machinery and technology is not only unable to absorb the uprooted peasants, but spells damage in general. It is thus the inability of the industrial sector to provide for his sustenance that makes Rarichan move to the town. One of the very first visuals of the urban space in the film is of a coffin-maker's shop. The sequences that contemplate on the

distressing nature of the coffin-maker's business – a business which ultimately thrives on death – become a significant device in the film to elaborate on the nature of the urban economy and suggest apprehensions about it. However, beyond the uneasiness about the city, the urban sphere is also shown as vibrant, offering possibilities of transcendence of caste and communal boundaries and building up new solidarities, in contrast to the stagnant rural landscape. The public spaces associated with urban economy – like the tea shop, the beedi factory, the bus that connects between the village and the town – are abound with exuberance and cheerful conversations. Thus, we see the workers at the beedi factory enthusiastically discussing a play they are planning to stage, people from different sections of the society merging and sharing lighter moments at Biyathumma's tea-shop (with a poster of *Neelakkuyil* in the background), etc. (See Figs iii.5-12). These are the only spaces in the film that enable the formation of new collectives and exude the charms of 'modern democratic' public spheres, facilitated by the conglomeration of various castes and communities (represented by men).

Newspaper Boy and the fears over industrialization

In contrast, *Newspaper Boy*, an initiative by a group of young enthusiasts, the distrust of industrialization is even more apparent. The city is Madras, falling outside the region of Kerala and projected as dystopic. The film appears as if it

wants to forewarn the spectator about the catastrophe that industrialization can bring about, at a time when concerted efforts towards rapid industrialization were being deliberated by the political leadership. The plot is structured as the flashback of a boy selling newspapers on the streets of a town in Kerala. The protagonist Appu, a poor boy, is forced by circumstances to take on the responsibilities of running his family at a very young age. Appu's father is vitally injured when his hand gets trapped in the machine at the press where he works. He loses his job and later dies of illness. In search of a job to support his family, Appu goes to Madras with the help of a neighbour who, we are told, has an 'office job' in the city. He soon realizes that the promises of the city are false. It turns out that the neighbour with the 'office job' in the city is the supplier at a restaurant. The urban space is hostile to Appu, and the city does not offer any financial prospects to save his debt-stricken family. He finally returns home and decides to make a living by selling newspapers on the street.

The film has striking similarities as well as crucial differences with *REP* in terms of the narrative and textual strategies. If *REP* employed the strategy of using the subaltern boy's viewpoint to traverse the urban space by superimposing on it the middle class's anxieties about industrialization and urban economy, this strategy is redeployed in *Newspaper Boy,* where the uprooted boy in the 'alienating' space of the city becomes a trope to cater to the middle class aspirations of traversing the urban sphere and consuming its grandeur on the one hand, and on the other,

to suggest a cautionary note about the deceptiveness of the urban space's grandeurs. The panoramic views of the Madras city, its trams and motor cars, and the shots of the animated streets with the orphaned protagonist in the background, are interspersed with the visuals of poor street children, the destitute and the manual labourers, as if to remind the spectator that the city's splendor is a façade (See also Figures iii.13-iii.20).

Both *REP* and *Newspaper Boy* attempt to deploy industrialization and the city as instant and ideal motifs to elaborate the theme of deprivation and suffering in universal registers of class differences. However, *Newspaper Boy's* tendency to exteriorize the city, and to spatially translate the modern as urban, differentiates it from *REP*, in which the boundaries of the urban and rural spaces blur, and the communal social structure overlaps both the rural and the urban spaces. While the rural relations in *REP* take the film to a narrative closure, there is a constant longing in *Newspaper Boy* for the rural landscape through nostalgic invocations of it as a lost paradise. The use of the song "*Maveli naadu vaaneedum kaalam*" ('When King Maveli ruled our land') in the film, invoking the utopian prosperity and egalitarianism of the yesteryears, is a clear example.

Figure iii.1

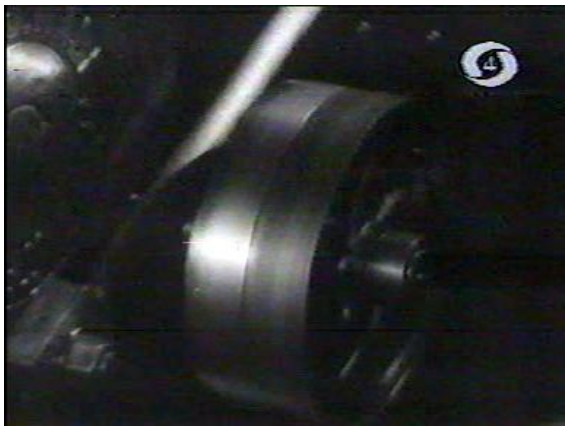

Figure iii.2

Figure iii.3

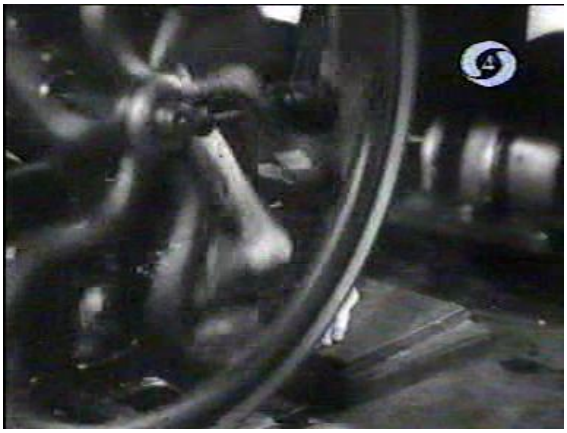

Figure iii.4

Figure iii.1-iii.4: The shots of the industrial workplace in which the machines dominate the frame, subjugating the human figure and reducing it to ghostly shadows and frail body parts. **Source**: *Newspaper Boy* (P Ramdas, 1955).

Reconstruction and Documentation of Space

One of the most striking differences between *REP* and *Newspaper Boy* is at the level of the use of real-location shooting. While *Newspaper Boy* extensively deploys documentary shots of the rural and urban landscape, *REP* is shot almost entirely in the studio. This differing investment in real-location shooting becomes markedly visible in the way these films capture the urban space. In *REP*, the

township, wherein most part of the narrative is set, is entirely reconstructed and shot within the studio, whereas *Newspaper Boy* offers extended documentary footages of the Madras city, its busy streets, motor vehicles and trams, the poor and the desolates, etc. This distinctiveness in terms of the use of studio shots or real location shooting in portraying the city in these films originates from the specific interests of the filmmakers in interpreting the urban sphere, as I shall try to argue.

The Leftist imagination, the site that produced *REP*, conceived the society as composed of distinct sections of people (in terms of castes, community, class), and always sought to reproduce these population segments in their distinctiveness not only in terms of the caste and communal specificities but also with regard to the social roles they perform. It is true that the Left in India always privileged an economically determined idea of class as the only modern social category and as the basis of political mobilization, and that categories of caste and community were seen as merely the residues of the pre-modern, pre-industrial social structure that need to be transcended in order to build political solidarity on the basis of class. Nevertheless, the ethnographic detailing of various sections of the population, often fixing these categories with specific markers, was one of the central impulses of much of the modern literature inspired by Leftist thoughts.

In *REP*, the communal organisation of the society does not go under much transformation even as the narrative backdrop shifts from the rural village to the urban spaces. Communities are imagined as taking up new social roles in the urban spaces; certain sections adapt to the new economy quite effortlessly, while certain others are completely absent from the urban sphere. The very first visuals of the urban space that the film offers us – through the Dalit boy Rarichan's eyes – are of the coffin-maker's shop run by Kariyachan, a Christian, a beedi factory owned by Seydali, a Muslim, and Biyathumma's tea-shop (in the order given in the film). Rarichan adapts himself to the new settings very quickly, becomes extremely adept at handling the deceptiveness of the city and traverses various spheres of the urban landscape with much ease. Besides, the non-Hindu and the subaltern sections of population are seen as inhabiting the urban sphere much more effortlessly than the high caste Hindus, who are conspicuous by their absence in *REP*'s urban landscape. Communities have to reorganize themselves in the wake of the social transformations, like the reform that the young educated Muslim man brings about in his family by marrying from a poor family, and by standing against the conservative practices of the community.

In short, in *REP*, the marking of the urban space with the presence/absence of various communities and castes, the detailing of the new social roles that these communities perform in the urban economy and the transformations that these communities go through in the urban sphere, etc., were some of the central

preoccupations of the film, which required careful reproduction of the caste and communal markers (of the characters as well as the urban space) within the controlled settings of the studio (See Figs iii.5-12). Thus, the location shooting in *REP* is limited to a few shots of the rural landscape, whereas the urban sphere is completely reconstructed and shot within the studio, in which the social profile and the identity-markers of the characters inhabiting the space acquire crucial significance and are represented in detail and with much care.

Figure iii.5

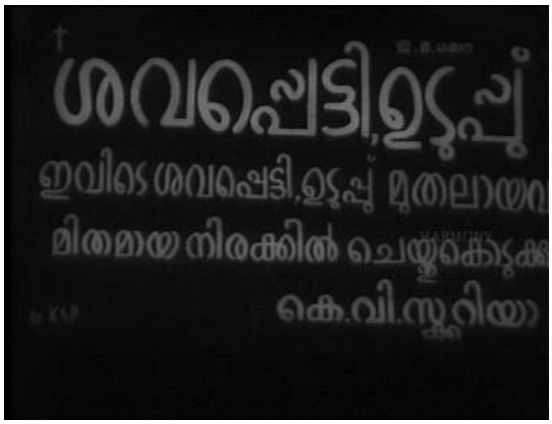

Figure iii.6

Figure iii.7

Figure iii.8

Figure iii.9

Figure iii.10

Figure iii.11

Figure iii.12

Figs iii.5-iii.12: The first shots of the town in *REP*, offered through Rarichan's viewpoint. Rarichan looking at the coffin-maker's shop owned by Kariyachan (Figs iii.5-iii.6), the workers engaging in a cheerful conversation at Seydali's beedi factory (Figs iii.7-iii.8), the street (Figs iii.9), Rarichan looking at the tea-shop run by Biyathumma, where the poster of *Neelakkuyil* is prominently displayed (Figs iii.10-iii.12). **Source:** *Rarichan Enna Powran* (P Bhaskaran, 1956)

If *REP* addressed the middle class anxieties stemming from the irreversible process of the urban economy gradually transforming the region's predominantly rural social structure, *Newspaper Boy* offered avenues of consuming the splendours of industrial modernity, by constantly disavowing its pleasures at the same time. A simultaneous process of expressing a desire for,

and denying, the pleasures of the city as well as cinema itself (both standing in for the values associated with western modernity and capitalist industrialization) becomes a central impulse of the narrative. The film's interest in the urban sphere/city begins and ends at this point. It does not have much interest in the lives of those who inhabit the city. In fact, the urban space and its economy reduce its inhabitants into just two broad categories of the rich and the poor – the universally recognizable categories. The city is already an alienating and exteriorized space, to be gazed at from a distance, and never to be fully given into. Capturing the deceptiveness of the city and the façade of its splendours seem to be the driving quests in *Newspaper Boy*'s visual rendition of the urban space. As discussed earlier, the panoramic views of the majestic city of Madras (minus the upbeat background musical score that often accompanies such shots in popular Hindi films), framed around the hapless protagonist and interspersed with shots of the homeless and the poor, serves this purpose (Figures iii.13-iii.20).

This is accompanied by a constant denial of cinema – marked with the excesses of western modernity – in the film, at the textual as well as the narrative level. Textually, the film distances itself from various conventions of popular cinema. At the narrative level, there are a number of occasions when references to cinema figures as an undesirable entertainment form. The protagonist Appu's impoverish-ness is established in the film through plot moments that shows the rich kids spending their pocket money on snacks and films, whereas Appu does

not have money even for his school fees. Later, as the story moves to the city, there is a scene of Appu refusing when a street-boy invites him to go for a movie "with lots of stunt and fights", saying that he has to save all the money for his family. Moved by Appu's plight, the street-boy also decides not to go for the movie, and instead donates the money to Appu.

Figure iii.13

Figure iii.14

Figure iii.15

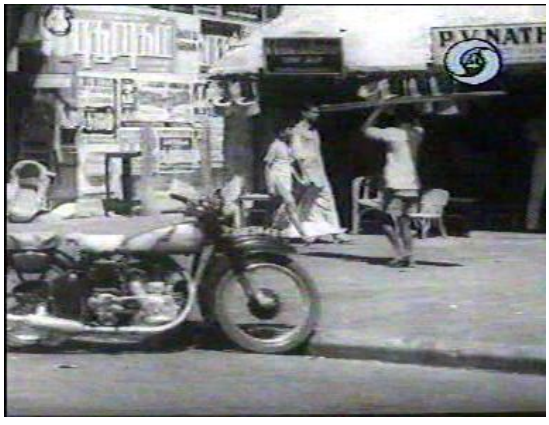

Figure iii.16

Figure iii.17

Figure iii.18

Figure iii.19

Figure iii.20

Fig iii.13-iii.20: The 'documentary' shots of Madras in *Newspaper Boy*, conveying the city's splendours, the hustle and bustle and its underbelly. **Source:** *Newspaper Boy* (P Ramdas, 1955).

In the dominant historical accounts, *Newspaper Boy* is considered as the first neo-realist cinema in Malayalam. Influenced by the international art cinema as well as the realist cinema in Bengal, the film adopted and deployed textual strategies of Italian neo-realism and Eisenstein's montage extensively. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* cites the film as the adaptation of the Bengali-Hindi "realist melodrama" *Babla* (Agradoot, 1951) (319-20). Firmly positioning itself as an artistic endeavor,

the film distanced itself from the Left's ideology of using the medium for political mobilization and reform. Its textual and representational strategies constituted and addressed the middle class spectator whose 'modern' subjectivity rested on his/her antagonistic relation to capitalist/industrial modernity, and produced a cultural differentiation from the mass audience of popular cinema, signified by the rejection of cinema.

As mentioned earlier, the market size of the middle class audience was too meager to sustain this aesthetic. However, the textual and narrative strategies that *REP* and *Newspaper Boy* experimented with were adopted by the attempts later during the decade to evolve an aesthetic of 'middle cinema' that incorporated the popular elements by subordinating them to the worldview of the middle class spectator (as I shall try to argue in Chapter IV by analyzing some of the films that were made during the early 1960s), as well as the art cinema movement of the 1970s.

Industrialization and the fissures within the Left

Our discussion of *REP* and *Newspaper Boy* points towards an interesting paradox in the region's history with regard to the Left's official policy of advocating rapid industrialization, and a rather overt antagonism against this drive as visible in the self-consciously 'modern' literature and cinema during the time that sought

to address primarily the middle class in Kerala. The decade of the 1950s is understood in the academic accounts about the region as a period when all historical forces, including the Left, unambiguously advocated modernization through rapid industrialization. For example, J Devika has argued that "*the leftist evocation of development as the way towards building a modern Kerala was characterized by an almost unconditional faith* that is absent in other evocations [of development]" (Devika 2007: 18; emphasis added), as in the works of some of the prominent poets of the time, like Vailoppilli Shreedhara Menon and Idassery, whose works expressed both hopes as well as the fear of destruction that the 'developmentalist' vision advocating rapid industrialization can bring about.

Undoubtedly, euphoric visions of modernization and development were gaining paramount importance in Kerala's political and cultural spheres in the context of the birth of the new linguistic region and the Nehruvian dream of the planning state. However, the analysis of *REP*, a film clearly inspired by the Leftist thoughts, indicates the fissures within the Left camp in Kerala during the 1950s, i.e., between the interventions initiated by the political leadership at the policy level supporting industrialization[7] and the anti-industrialization rhetoric as well

[7] Kerala has the rare history of an elected Communist government inviting capitalist investment from outside the region in order to facilitate industrialization. E M S Namboodiripad, the chief minister of the first Communist government, invited the Birla Group to invest in Kerala (in Malabar – where the Communist Party had a decisive influence, and a region identified as more backward than the southern regions) and start a factory – Gwalior Rayons – for producing pulp and fibre at Mavoor, Kozhikode, in the 1960s. The factory is also known as Grasim or Mavoor Rayons. In 1985, Mavoor Rayons shut down for 3 years. In 1988, the Government of Kerala

as the ambivalent outlook towards urban economy that the Left-affiliated artists articulated in the cultural sphere. This ambivalence was clearly visible in the later Left-mobilizational films, like *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (Ramu Kariat, 1961) and *Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi* (M S Mani, 1962) – both written by Thoppil Bhasi, the renowned playwright associated with the Communist Party in Kerala – as well (see Chapter IV for a discussion of these films). *These contradictory articulations were the result of the complex negotiations that the Left in Kerala had to engage in during the time, on the one hand with the lower caste/class majority – who also formed a major support base for the Communist Party in Kerala – and on the other, with the traditionally powerful sections as well as an emerging middle class, in order to maintain its power.* While the first Communist ministry had to maintain its hold among the lower castes / classes by offering hopes of radical social transformation (the rhetoric of rapid industrialization definitely forms part of this), it simultaneously had to constantly attend to, and allay, the fears and apprehensions of the traditionally powerful high caste groups as well as the middle class about the changes that such initiatives would bring about; more often than not, the Left acceded to the pressures and demands of the latter.

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offered more concessions to the management and the factory was re-opened by the management. The factory witnessed a series of labour strikes and heightened trade union activities. All these factors contributed to the closing down of Mavoor Rayons in 2002. At the time of the winding up of its operations, Mavoor Rayons was still the largest private sector industrial unit in the state. The region's dream of rapid industrialization remains an unrealized goal, the reasons for which are topics of passionate discussions within the academic as well as popular and journalistic domains. See also Sreekumar and Sanjeev (2003) for a compilation of essays discussing the visions of industrialization and development in the region.

Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu and the spectacle of industrial modernity

The articulations of industrialization and the approach to urban economy altered considerably when the Left addressed the mass audience, as I shall try to illustrate by analysing *Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu* (Nair's Dilemma: 1958), another film written by Uroob and directed by P Bhaskaran. Moving away from social realism, this film gave prominence to comedy tracks and capitalized on the popular entertainment form of circus that showcases physical prowess. It signaled a desire to move away from the stagnant village economy – where a coalition of aristocratic and bureaucratic classes attempts to reinforce its power and privileges – by presenting avenues of letting the urban economy (represented by the commercial entertainment form of circus) interfere into the structures of the former, though the realization of such possibilities remained only partially fulfilled. The film was advertised as a comedy film, and flaunted the long sequences of circus performance.[8]

The film is about the troubles that a restaurant-owner in a village runs into after sealing a contract with a touring circus company that visits the village. The sleepy village comes alive with the arrival of the circus company; Paithal Nair (Muthaiah) and Kurup (Muthukulam Raghavan Pillai) – both running

[8] It should be noted that this career move by P Bhaskaran, moving away from social realism, undermined his position in the dominant historical accounts about Malayalam cinema. For example, Vijayakrishnan writes: "P Bhaskaran was one of the directors, among his contemporaries, who succumbed to compromises very often. […] By making *Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu*, Bhaskaran descended from the heights of hard realities to the world of comedy" (Vijayakrishnan 1987: 97-99).

restaurants in the village with negligible returns – compete with each other to strike a business contract with the touring circus company for providing food during its stay in the village. Luck favours Paithal Nair, as it turns out that Chandran (Sathyan), the leading performer in the company, is his nephew who had left the village long back to join the circus. Paithal Nair and his family had offered refuge to Chandran when he was very young after the death of his parents. Chandran convinces the circus company manager to give the contract to Paithal Nair. Romance blooms between Chandran and Thankam (Ragini), Paithal Nair's daughter.

Meanwhile, Gopi, a suspended police officer and an influential man in the village in terms of social status, who also covets Thankam, becomes jealous of the latter's affair with Chandran. Gopi's grudge against Chandran grows as the circus company refuses to pay him the customary free passes. In a plot to end the circus company's stay in the village, Gopi, along with Kurup and other influential people in the village, hire goondas to kill Chandran. In the fight with the goondas, Chandran is injured and is compelled to take rest. Chandran being the star performer, his injury affects the circus company's commercial prospects severely. The company has to end its stay in the village, but is unable to settle the accounts with Paithal Nair. As a mortgage, the company decides to leave the circus animals with Paithal Nair until it is able to settle the accounts.

Seeing that Paithal Nair is in debt, the Muslim, Christian and the Tamil Brahmin money-lenders begin to nag the former. Gopi offers financial help to Paithal Nair on the condition that the marriage between him and Thankam should be arranged soon. Thankam refuses. A furious Gopi makes plans to torture the Nair family. Later, out of helplessness, the Nair's family agrees for the marriage. Meanwhile, Chandran, who is staying in a neighbouring village with the circus troupe, comes to know about Gopi's plots. He decides to perform trapeze without the safety net so that he can make money quickly to repay the company's debts to Nair and rescue the family from its financial debt. In the meantime, Latika (Prema), a co-performer in the circus who nurtures a romantic interest in Chandran, grows jealous of his affair with Thankam, and plots to kill him during the performance. Chandran escapes with minor injuries, but the performance is cancelled, foiling Chandran's plans to make quick money. Undeterred, Chandran rushes to the village to prevent the marriage.

Meanwhile, Kochunni (Kochappan), Kurup's son who also covets Thankam, uncages the wild animals that the circus company had left at Nair's place, in order to spoil the marriage ceremony. The wild animals create havoc. Chandran reaches on time and tames the animals, which had, by then, killed Gopi. In the end, the police arrests those who helped Gopi plot against Paithal Nair and his family, as Chandran and Thankam unite.

The prominence that the characters played by Bahadoor and S P Pillai, two prominent comedians in the industry, as buffoons in the circus, is noteworthy. The witty song "*Kaathu Sookshichoru Kasthoori Mambazham*" (composed by K Raghavan, written by P Bhaskaran and sung by Mehaboob) that S P Pillai sings in the film became one of the major attractions in the film, and had the resonances of the extremely popular songs visualized on Johnny Walker in the Hindi films of the 1950s. It also set the trend of later films incorporating one or more humorous songs visualized on comedians like S P Pillai, Bahadoor, Adoor Bhasi, Sukumari, etc. The film also included long sequences showing the circus troupe's performances. Sathyan, as the star performer in the troupe (and of the film industry), was showcased as muscular, exuding physical prowess – as opposed to the portly physique suggesting aristocratic lineage which the middle class often identify with – in these sequences[9] (See Figures iii.21 – iii.24).

[9] Sathyan's character is not shown as muscular throughout the film. For example, in the romance sequences, he is portrayed in the familiar physique that middle class heroes are usually shown. However, it is precisely his muscular prowess and the physical agility associated with gymnasts – which he showcases during the circus performances – that ultimately help him tame the animals in the end and bring an end to the havoc that the uncaged circus animals create during the marriage ceremony. Nevertheless, in the film, Sathyan's character remains a man of both the worlds – an important strategy with significant implications for the narrative resolution.

Figure iii. 21

Figure iii.22

Figure iii.23

Figure iii.24

Figs. iii.21-iii.24: Sathyan as the star performer in the circus troupe. **Source**: *Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu* (P Bhaskaran, 1958).

The film indicates the desires to see the stagnant rural economy transformed. It clearly sides with the imperatives of an industrial economy when, using the comedians, it makes fun of the villain's demand for 'free passes' from the circus company – a system of patronage through which the aristocratic and bureaucratic classes exerted their control over the forces of industrial/capitalist

modernization;[10] it thus exudes certain confidence to confront the pre-industrial, aristocratic structures of power – the remnants of the feudal social order. However, the possibilities of the commercial economy to intervene in the power structures of the rural sphere are contained by the narrative as well. Portraying Chandran as a man of both worlds – as the star performer in the circus company on the one hand, and as blood-related to the Nair family on the other hand, traditionally entitled to marry Thankam, his cousin-lover[11] – is one narrative mechanism that serves this purpose. The other strategy was to introduce a crisis within the circus company (Latika's romantic interest in Chandran, and her attempt to spoil the latter's trapeze performance in order to prevent his marriage with Thankam) that wrecks Chandran's plans to make quick money and settle the company's debts to the Nair's family. Ultimately, what brings Chandran back to the village is his love for Thankam and his indebtedness to the Nair family.

The narrative, thus, appropriates selectively from the potentials that the industrial economy holds, while containing others. The havoc that the uncaged circus animals create at the marriage symbolizes the apprehensions about the urban economy and its interventions. Nevertheless, these beasts are let loose until they devour and destroy the villain, representing certain power structures

[10] See also Chapter I: 56-7 for a discussion on how the 'free pass' system was instituted as a system of patronage and how the early exhibitors in Kerala negotiated with it.

[11] Marriage between cousins was a traditional practice followed among some of the matrilineal communities in Kerala, and is still a matter of nostalgia for Nairs, the most prominent community with a matrilineal past in the region.

maintained by the aristocratic-bureaucratic classes. However, ultimately, they need to be tamed by the star's physical prowess, which the narrative reiterates as indebted to the Nair family. The forces of the industrial economy are invoked only as far as they can wipe out the remnants of the feudal moral world, like the privileges that the coalition of aristocratic and bureaucratic classes enjoy; once that is achieved, the faith in the moral economy of the rural sphere, structured around the benevolent Hindu high caste family, is reiterated.

Chapter IV

Martyr Narratives and the Middle Aesthetics of Integration

By the late 1950s, there were indications that a thriving commercial cinema was emerging in Malayalam. The local studios like Udaya and Merryland, set up in the late 1940s, realigned their mode of operation by being more attentive to the culturally specific needs and aspirations of the regional audience, slowly moving away from the production regime that targeted a larger south Indian market and important offshore markets in Sri Lanka and South East Asia. This coincided with the formation of the linguistic states in south India, as well as the drawing of rigid cultural and commercial boundaries of nation-states globally.[1] Films were made in considerably large numbers, and at low costs, facilitating the emergence of a commercial filmmaking industry, catering to even small audience segments within the region. Besides, provincial studios in Tamil Nadu in regions far from Madras – like Modern Theatres, Salem – showed a clear interest in the distinct audience segments emerging in linguistic markets like Kerala. The presence of local studios also enabled a number of small-time producers to emerge and try their luck in films. One such example is *Newspaper Boy* (P Ramadas, 1955), which was made at Merryland Studio, Thiruvananthapuram, by

[1] See also Vasudevan (2010a) for an attempt to understand the changes that the setting up of rigid national boundaries and bounded cultural entities of regions brought about in the film cultures in India as well as in other regions in South East Asia.

a band of amateurs, at low cost and with no consideration for its commercial prospects, targeting an emerging middle class audience. Nevertheless, the filmmakers continued to depend especially on studios in Madras for shooting floors, sound recording and mixing, dubbing, editing and other technical facilities to a large extent.

Another significant result was a shift in the focus of the industry from making the hold-all genre of socials to producing low-budget films, targeting particular audience segments within the region, leading to the establishment of a flourishing commercial cinema in Malayalam by the 1960s. While close to 60 films were made during the 1950s, the number of films produced in Malayalam rose to around 270 during the 1960s. Meanwhile, the industry initiated attempts to organize itself and lobby with the government. The Kerala Film Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1956, with K. V. Koshy as the president, to mediate with the government for securing financial assistance for the producers and favourable legal measures for the distributors and exhibitors.

Three broad generic tendencies

The scenario described above also meant that the industry remained fragmented, with no particular genre or aesthetic emerging as dominant. Towards the end of the 1950s and during the 1960s, three significant generic segments can be

identified as emerging in Malayalam cinema. These segments, though small, can be defined broadly as: 1.) the 'women's cinema', 2.) what were called 'Christian / Muslim socials', and 3.) the films based on *Vadakkan Paattukal*, myths and folktales. I shall briefly describe some of the defining characteristics of these generic tendencies, before proposing what this segmentation signified in the changed cultural-political context in the region during the period. The Chapter will then look at the attempts in the industry to evolve a middle aesthetics that sought to bring these generic elements together and subsume them under the rubric of nationalist social modernisation by deploying martyr narratives.

The 'women's cinema' consisted mainly of romance dramas and 'tearjerkers'. While the romance dramas mostly elaborated on the private space between the conjugal couple,[2] the heterosexual love between the protagonists from disparate social backgrounds or the estranged romantic pair[3], etc., the theme of the 'tearjerkers' would mostly centre around the female protagonist, narrativising her desires and distresses in various ways.[4] This cluster of films addressed women as a distinct audience segment, and explored certain emotive realms and

[2] *Poothaali* (P Subrahmaniam, 1960), *Bharya* (Kunchacko, 1962), *Bharthavu* (M Krishnan Nair, 1964), and *Kudumbini* (Sasikumar & P A Thomas, 1964) can be pointed out as examples.

[3] *Padatha Paingili* (P Subrahmaniam, 1957), *Laila Majnu* (P Bhaskaran, 1962), *Ina Pravukal* (Kunchacko, 1965) and *Ramanan* (D M Pottakkadu, 1967) are examples.

[4] For example, *Sthree Hridayam* (J D Thottan, 1960), *Neelisali* (Kunchacko, 1960), *Nithyakanyaka* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1963), *Kalayum Kaaminiyum* (P Subrahmaniam, 1963), *Susheela* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1963), *Sthanarthi Saaraamma* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1966), *Udyogastha* (Venu, 1967), *Adhyapika* (P Subrahmaniam, 1968).

thematic aspects that were identified as directly appealing to them. Films were made based on a number of popular pulp novels written by writers like Muttathu Varkey and E J Kanam, and considered to have tremendous appeal to women readers. More often than not, questions and anxieties about women's subjectivity were elaborated and resolved within the parameters of the dominant ideology.

Another significant generic segment that emerged during this period is what the industry experts termed as 'Christian / Muslim socials'. The plot would be set within Muslim or Christian surroundings, foregrounding many aspects that were conceived as ethnically specific to the cultures of these communities, and often directly addressing these communities. Commentators referred to these films also as '*samudaya chithrangal*'. Films like *Umma* (Kunchacko, 1960,) *Kandam Becha Kottu* (T R Sundaram, 1961), *Kuttikkuppayam* (M Krishnan Nair, 1964), *Kuppivala* (S S Rajan, 1965), *Ayisha* (Kunchacko, 1964), *Kaathirunna Nikkah* (M Krishnan Nair, 1965) and *Subeida* (M S Mani, 1965) were examples of 'Muslim socials'.[5] Similarly, films like *Paadaatha Painkili* (P Subrahmaniam, 1957), *Mariyakkutty* (P Subrahmaniam, 1958), *Christmas Rathri* (P Subrahmaniam, 1961), *Bharya* (Kunchacko, 1962), *Snehadeepam* (P Subrahmaniam, 1962), *Aadyakiranangal*

[5] Moithu Padiyath, a literary figure during the period, wrote the story for a number of these films, like *Kuttikkuppayam*, *Umma* and *Kuppivala*. *Kandam Becha Kottu,* the first full length colour film in Malayalam, was produced and directed by T R Sundaram of Modern Theatres, Salem.

(P Bhaskaran, 1964), and *Anna* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1964) were set in Christian contexts, and were expected to attract a Christian audience.[6]

The third broad generic segment included films based on folklores, *vadakkan paattukal* ('the ballads of north Malabar') and religious myths. Kunchacko of Udaya Studio is often credited for inventing a new genre capitalizing on *vadakkan paattukal*[7]. Films based on these popular ballads, like *Unniyarcha* (Kunchacko, 1961), *Umminithanka* (G Viswanath, 1961), *Palattu Koman* (Kunchacko, 1962) and *Thacholi Othenan* (S S Rajan, 1964), became tremendously popular, and were trendsetters in the industry. Offering a host of spectacles, these films displayed physical prowess and agility through long sequences of sword fights, *kalarippayattu* (a traditional martial art form), tussles between human beings and wild animals, etc. Some commentators refer to these films as 'the samurai films of Malayalam', indicating the centrality of the sequences involving sword fights and physical tussles. The heroines – popularly revered aristocratic figures – were shown in glamorous costumes, and were portrayed as adept in sword fights. (See Figure iv.1). Ragini, a popular actress, came to be known for her sensational

[6] Muttathu Varkey wrote the story for *Paadaatha Painkili*, *Mariyakkutty*, *Chirstmas Rathri* and *Snehadeepam*. *Aadyakiranangal* was an adaptation of a novel of the same title authored by K E Mathai, popularly known as Parappurath.

[7] *Vadakkan Paattukal* are ballads of medieval origin, extolling the adventures of men and women from feudal families of North Malabar. Recounting the stories of blood feuds, these ballads praise the hero or heroine for their valour and skill in martial arts and their adherence to righteousness even when facing adversities. Many of the heroes and heroines in these ballads often achieve the status of deities. The reference to the martial art *Kalarippayattu* is one of the most noted aspects about these ballads. The Malayalam used in these ballads is understood as closer to the spoken idiom. See Mathew 1979 for an account of *vadakkan paattukal*.

appearances in a number of these films. The centrality of the female protagonists in these films is so striking that in *Unniyarcha* (Kunchacko, 1961), the eponymous character Ragini played in the film far outshone those played by Sathyan and Prem Nazir, the two leading stars of the industry during the time. Combining the attractions of costume dramas, choreographed fights and dance sequences, theatricality in dialogues and acting, outdoor shots of the landscapes, etc, most of these films were multi-starrers as well. The grandeur of a feudal past was evoked by recurring themes of friendship and rivalry, loyal protagonists fighting on behalf of the righteous patrons, battles to protect honour, tales of betrayal and revenge, etc.

Meanwhile, the mythological staged a come-back as one of the prominent genres during the early 1960s. Udaya and Merryland studios competed with each other to make mythological films targeting a wider South Indian audience. *Seetha* (Kunchacko, 1960), *Bhakthakuchela* (P Subrahmaniam, 1961), *Krishnakuchela* (Kunchacko, 1961), *Sabarimala Sree Ayyappan* (Sriramulu Naidu, 1961), *Srirama Pattabhishekam* (P Subrahmaniam, 1962), *Sathyabhama* (M S Mani, 1963), *Sree Guruvayoorappan* (S Ramanathan, 1964), *Sakunthala* (Kunchacko, 1965) are examples. In addition, a number of films based on Biblical tales and other Christian themes were also made during this time.[8] P Subrahmaniam produced

[8] *Jnanasundari* (K S Sethumadhavan, 1961), *Rebecca* (Kunchacko, 1963), *Snapakayohannan* (P Subrahmaniam, 1963) are examples. Muttathu Varkey wrote the dialogues for *Jnanasundari* and *Snapakayohannan*.

and directed a good number of these films under his production banner Neela.[9] This broad genre of films based on myths, folktales and *vadakkan paattukal* was instrumental in reaffirming the hold of production banners like Jayamaruthi Films (owned by T E Vasudevan of the distribution firm Associated Pictures), Excel of Udaya studio and Neela Productions, in the industry during the 1960s, though none of these banners specialized in one particular genre.

Figure iv.1 *Figure iv.2*

Figure iv.1: A poster of *Palattu Koman* (Kunchacko, 1962) featuring Ragini. **Figure iv.2**: A screenshot of Sathyan from the same film. **Source**: *Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema* (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).

[9] *Nana*, a popular cinema magazine in Malayalam, described P. Subrahmaniam as 'the director of Gods' ('*daivangalude samvidhayakan*') (*Nana* Special Issue, 4 January, 1976; Vol 4, No 2: 26-27).

The films falling under the three broad generic tendencies described above seem to have clearly outnumbered the studio socials and the socio realist films during this period. In other words, this period signified the disaggregation of the regional population – sought to be held together as one community of 'Malayalees' by the socials and the socialist realism – into distinct audience segments. The currency of the (sub)nationalist consensus built around the modern, secular communist figure (always represented by the Hindu upper caste male) in the social realism of the mid-1950s proved to be transient and seemed to be eroding fast. The discourse of a modern nation of united Malayalees – so central to social realism – seemed to have lost its appeal for various sections of the audience.

Vimochana Samaram and the breakdown of the nationalist consensus

In the political realm, Kerala witnessed a turbulent period during the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. After the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956, the Communists and the allied Independents formed a majority and won the second Indian general elections of 1957, and E M S Namboodiripad became the chief minister of the state's first ministry. The Communists, however, could not stay in power for long. The government was ousted in 1959 and President's Rule was imposed on the state following a storm of opposition called 'Vimochana Samaram' (Liberation Struggle), led by the Catholic Church and the Nair Service

Society (NSS), with the support of political parties like the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and the Congress Party, against a few controversial policies of the Communist government. The Kerala Education Act introduced by the Communist government in 1957, proposing provisions for greater state control of private schools that received grants from the government, aroused the Catholic Church, which was at the forefront of the agitation.[10] By the late 1950s, of the 9500 primary and secondary schools in the state, more than 60 per cent were run by private managements. Nearly 70 per cent of corporate private managements were Christian. The Act stipulated that the private managements would be able to hire teachers only from a government-compiled list and that appointments would be on a communal rotation. The Church feared that the Act was an attempt "to diminish the Christian influence in Kerala" and "to taint the content of education with a certain political ideology." (Jeffrey 2003: 156) As Devika and Varghese observe, "[t]he Syrian Catholic elite actually overcame this crisis using a dual strategy: by deploying the prosecuted-minority argument, and [...] by creating a majoritarian front of religious communities against the communists" (Devika & Varghese, 2011: 119). [11]

[10] The 'Liberation Struggle' is often referred to as 'the crusade' against the communists, both in academic and popular accounts. See Leiten (1977) for example.

[11] See also T T Sreekumar (2010). Revisiting the context of the Liberation Struggle, Sreekumar has argued that the struggle drew on the legacies of the Abstention Movement (1934) led by a coalition of Muslim-Christian-Ezhava communities during the 1930s seeking representation in the Sri Moolam Legislative Assembly of the Travancore princely state, and the protests launched by the religious minorities against a similar bill introduced by the Travancore Diwan C P Ramaswamy Iyer in 1942 that sought to 'nationalise' the educational institutions run by private managements. His essay argues that these struggles, which are commonly understood as the

Though a crucial aspect triggering the Liberation Struggle was the discontent among the Christians and Muslims against the Hindu majoritarian interests that lurk behind the agendas of 'state secularism' and 'nationalisation', a number of other factors were also instrumental in turning different communities, especially the high caste groups, against the communist ministry, as many accounts point out. The Nair Service Society's changing stances on the Education Act point towards the multi-layered nature of the joint opposition against the communist government. Initially, the Act was welcomed by the NSS, and Mannath Padmanabhan, its leader, had opposed the Christian agitation, saying that 'the vested interests of the Church to sow the seeds of unrest must be stopped by all means' (Lieten 1977: 13). The NSS expected that the Bill would entail more funds for their schools and less for the 'ecclesiastical' schools (Lieten 1979: 38). It also hoped that the provisions for filling of teaching vacancies on a communal rotation would allow Nairs greater access to employment in Christian schools. However, the final legislation made it clear that the main beneficiaries would be lower-caste Hindus, primarily Ezhavas. This resulted in the NSS leadership losing its initial enthusiasm about the Act (Jeffrey 2003: 156). Later, as the land reform measures of the government (Kerala Agricultural Relations Bill, 1958),

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interventions of the 'communal' interests in the 'secular' public sphere, should be seen as moments of political resistances from the part of the religious minorities in Kerala against the dominant secular ethos wherein the interests of the minority religious communities gets branded as 'communal', whereas those of the majoritarian religion often pass off as 'secular'. The Communist Party in Kerala, he argues, has functioned, more often than not, within the coordinates of 'state secularism' that accommodates and protects the Hindu religious interests, thus making the presence of a Hindu right wing party like Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Kerala redundant.

though weak in its recommendations, started threatening the interests of the landowning sections among the Nairs as well as other upper caste communities including the Syrian Christians, the NSS changed its stance and joined the campaigns against the communist regime (Lieten 1977).[12]

Irrespective of the original intentions of the communities and agents, the struggle cracked open the 'nationalist' consensus built around the populist Communism led by the Hindu upper caste leadership. The hegemonic discourse of modernity and rationality, inspired by the Communist ideology, began facing challenges from various quarters; the dominant ideas of secularism were being contested. The political situation that emerged following the Liberation Struggle seemed to resemble the conditions in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin during the late Nineteenth Century and the first decades of the Twentieth Century, where various caste and religious communities – especially Nairs, Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims – operated as pressure groups, often by building expedient political alliances with other groups, campaigning for adequate representation in the administrative machineries and demanding various welfare

[12] Other reasons have also been pointed out for the NSS's changing stances against the communist regime. For example, the Report of the Administrative Reforms Committee, 1958, had recommended that the reservation of posts in the government service and seats in educational institutions should be based on economic backwardness rather than on the basis of caste. The NSS supported the recommendation. However, the government did not proceed to implement it taking into account the opposition from the lower caste Ezhava community – a major support base for the Communist Party in Kerala. This infuriated the NSS. The Left sympathizers have also alleged that the struggle had received financial support from America's CIA, which apparently wanted to make sure that the elected Communist government in the region did not last long.

measures for the respective communities.[13] Exemplifying this scenario, the electoral politics in Kerala has remained, ever since, as a domain of coalitions, where the Communist Party and the Congress form oppositional fronts on the eve of elections through negotiations with political parties like the Muslim League and the Kerala Congress parties[14] (which represent the Syrian Christian interests), as well as the caste-based organizations like the Nair Service Society (NSS) and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) of the Ezhavas, even though the Communist Party of India (Marxist) still remains the most powerful single party in Kerala. The rationalist, modernist discourse that the Communists conceived as the cornerstone of modern Malayali nationalism sustains its dominant, if not hegemonic, hold in Kerala, while strong contestations and oppositions from various quarters against this dominant discourse mark the everyday public life in the region.

Moulding a 'middle' aesthetics of integration

As indicated in the beginning of the chapter, though a thriving commercial cinema emerged in Malayalam cinema by the 1960s, the industry remained fragmented, with no genre or aesthetic evolving as dominant. The fragmented

[13] See Desai (2001), Jeffrey (2003), Arunima (2006) for discussions on how different communities negotiated with the princely states and the British authorities during the late 19th and the early 20th Century in Kerala.

[14] Kerala Congress was formed by the dissident Congressmen with the support of the Catholic Church and the NSS on the eve of the elections in 1965. The party has split into several factions later.

industry and the audience segments were signalled at, when we identified the three broad generic tendencies that emerged in the industry by the early 1960s. Apart from them, there were even attempts to cater exclusively to particular sub-regions, often by re-constituting and addressing the regional constituencies in the form they existed before the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956. *Umminithanka* (G Viswanath, 1961), a film based on a folktale adopted from the Southern Ballads[15] popular in southern Travancore is an example. The film tells the story of Ummini Thanka who attained the status of a deity in the popular memory for her brave stance against Marthandavarma, the erstwhile king of Travancore.[16] The story goes like this: following the matrilineal tradition, Marthandavarama becomes the king of Travancore after the death of his uncle. Romance blooms between Marthandavarma and Ummini Thanka, his cousin. Ummini Thanka's brothers, sons of the deceased king, try to capture the throne by allying with a few dissenting nobles. Marthandavarma kills all of them; Ummini Thanka's mother also dies hearing the news of her sons' death. An agitated Ummini Thanka curses Marthandavarma and his kingdom. She, then, plucks out her tongue with which she uttered the curse words, and dies; upon her death, she is transformed into a deity. The film included dialogues, songs

[15] Southern Ballads, or *Thekkan Paattukal*, is a genre of folk songs similar to *Vadakkan Paattukal*, recounting the stories of heroic deeds of warriors of royal and feudal lineages. Rich in Tamil usages, they were in circulation in southern Travancore.

[16] See also Bindu Menon (2009) for a discussion on how the folktales about Ummini Thanka were appropriated by the attempts to construct an image of Marthandavarma as a 'modern' king, when the Travancore government decided to make a film based on the life of the erstwhile king.

and titles in Tamil, targeting the audience in southern Travancore – a region with a mixed population of Tamil and Malayalam speakers (parts of which, after 1956, were integrated into the newly formed states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala), and also considered as a region where the hold of the Communists was tenuous.[17]

A detailed study of the industry during the 1960s is beyond the scope of this project. This chapter will confine itself to identifying some initiatives in the first half of the 1960s that tried to mobilize the fragmented audience segments under the rhetoric of nationalist social progress by deploying martyr narratives. *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (The Prodigal Son: Ramu Kariat, 1961) and *Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi* (A New Horizon, A New World: M S Mani, 1962), two films written by Thoppil Bhasi based on the plays he wrote for the KPAC, are analysed here to argue that these films attempted, on the one hand, to evolve a 'middle' aesthetics which would incorporate the popular elements but by subordinating them to the ideal middle class spectator's viewpoint, and on the other, to hold together various audience segments and mobilize them under the rhetoric of nationalist social progress constructed around a central martyr figure. The first aspect was part of the attempts to evolve an economically viable 'middle' cinema

[17] Hartmann says that one of the major political consequences of the territorial readjustments as part of the reorganization of the states in 1956 was that "the position of the Communists in the new State of Kerala was strengthened both by the inclusion of Malabar, where they had a decisive influence, and by the exclusion of South Travancore, where they had practically no influence." (Hartmann 1968: 167) The south Travancore also witnessed the secessionist movement for 'Independent Travancore' during the 1940s, demanding that the princely state of Travancore should not join the Indian Union.

that would make space for the popular elements considered as appealing to the masses (like songs, dances, etc.), but only by subordinating them to the impulses of the realist narrative and to the middle class spectatorial subjectivity that the representational strategies in these films tried to constitute. This has to be seen in the context of the emergence of considerable middle class patronage for cinema by the mid-1950s on the one hand and, on the other, the industry's limitations in addressing this middle class audience segment exclusively, mainly due to the meagre market size of the latter.[18] The preoccupation with martyr narratives, the other significant aspect about these films, signified the attempts to mobilize and reintegrate the dissenting sections of the population under the overarching theme of nationalist social progress.

Mudiyanaya Puthran tells the story of Rajan or Rajashekharan Pillai (Sathyan), the youngest son from a Nair family, who grows up as a wastrel. His wealthy and scheming elder brother Gopala Pillai (Kottayam Chellappan) marries the former's childhood sweetheart Radha (Ambika). Gopala Pillai is now a construction contractor, and moves to a new house with his wife. Rajan lives with his mother (Adoor Bhavani) and sister, but he never takes care of the family; the wealthy Gopala Pillai declines to help them as well. Vasu (PJ Antony), a mobilized Ezhava labourer, who lives in the neighbourhood, is the

[18] See Chapter III for a discussion of some of the attempts in Malayalam cinema to address the middle class audience exclusively during the 1950s.

only one who comes to the help of the mother and her young daughter. Rajan leads a dissolute life, and ends up hurting even those who love him. He once beats Vasu during a silly brawl, which provokes the mother to command Rajan to leave the house.

Ousted from home, Rajan is injured in a fight with goondas hired by Gopala Pillai. He is nursed by Vasu and Chellamma (Miss Kumari), daughter of Chathan Pulayan (Kambissery Karunakaran), a Dalit labourer and the former slave of Rajan's family. Seeing the love and care that he receives from the Dalit family, Rajan begins to undergo a process of self-reformation and begins to empathize with the lower castes. Rajan falls in love with Chellamma. Meanwhile, Vasu, who is working for Gopala Pillai, organizes a strike against the latter. Gopala Pillai recruits a gang to attack the striking labourers. In a fight, Vasu stabs one of Gopala Pillai's men. Gopala Pillai frames Rajan also in the murder case. Vasu and Rajan go in hiding as the Police begin the search for them. Rajan realizes that "the land needs Vasu", the Communist revolutionary. In the end, he decides to sacrifice his life and surrenders to the police in order to save Vasu from the gallows.

One of the central impulses in the film was to criticize the organizations that mobilize people on the basis of their castes. The negative characters in the film – Gopala Pillai and his assistant Krishnan Nair (Adoor Bhasi) – are active members

and office bearers of a *samudaya sangham* (caste association), clearly alluding to the NSS. Part of their wickedness emerges from their involvement in the caste association, and their attempts to retain the social structure divided along caste lines. They make plans to harass people from their own caste who decline to contribute money for the association. Besides, they support the activities of Shasthri (Thoppil Krishnapillai), a Dalit character and an object of mockery throughout the film, who runs an organization for the Dalit castes. Both Krishnan Nair and Shasthri are associated with a religious association called *Hindu Mandalam* as well. These activities mobilizing people on the basis of caste and religion are clearly disapproved of, and are shown as hindering the social progress based on class revolution, the success of which ultimately depends on building solidarities across castes and communities.[19] In contrast, Vasu, the

[19] One of the interesting changes made in the film from the original play, written in 1957, is the reference to Christians and religious conversion. In the play, Krishnan Nair, during a conversation, tells Gopala Pillai that members of their caste should learn from the Christians how to organize and strengthen their own community. He also laments that since caste organizations among the Dalits were not powerful, the former were converting, en masse, to Christianity. In another context, Shasthri tells Vasu that he attended a meeting of the 'Hindu mission', where 47 lower caste Christians were converted back to Hinduism. To this, Vasu replies sarcastically: "Big deal!" However, in the film, these conversations are removed, except the second instance, that too with an interesting modification. Instead of saying the lower castes are converting en masse to Christianity, Krishnan Nair, in the film, says disapprovingly that the lower castes are joining *thozhilali prasthanam* ('labourers' union' – the associations, affiliated to the Communist Party, that organize the lower caste workers under the secular and class-determined label of 'labourers'). This substitution of Christianity (in the play) with *thozhilali prasthanam* (in the film) brings to light an underlying anxiety of the Hindu high caste leadership of the Left, which could be this: the whole fracas and furor about religious conversion and re-conversion could have been avoided, had the 'conservative' high caste Hindus realized the possibilities of keeping the lower castes within the ambit of Hinduism by providing the latter certain basic civil rights through controlled class revolution proposed by Communism.

Moreover, the reference to the Christians as an organized community, whom the Nairs should emulate, comes from a negative character. It remains rather an ambiguous moment, since it is not clear whether the playwright actually approves of the way Christians organize themselves; there are no strong signals of disapproval as well. Whereas, by removing this

Ezhava labourer, strives to build a collective of labourers from across the lower castes, organizes the strike, and succeeds in negotiating directly with the government for better wages, bypassing the contractor Gopala Pillai and his aides who play the middlemen. It is to save Vasu from the gallows that Rajan sacrifices his own life.

Rajan's "self-outlawed"[20] subjectivity allows the text to produce a distance for the audience from the world of the upper castes and their activities, and functions as a means to traverse the spaces of the lower castes, romanticized as vibrant with joyfulness and music. It serves as a crucial strategy for the film to produce an 'unmarked' spectatorial subjectivity for the ideal middle class audience, both by *not* nullifying its upper caste location but, at the same time, by creating avenues for the audience to distance itself from its caste location – the precise mechanism through which the middle class occupies the position of the 'unmarked' citizen-subject simultaneously by retaining as well as rendering invisible its (Hindu) upper caste location. The way in which the film appropriates and subordinates romance – a crucial ingredient of popular cinema – is noteworthy in this context. Radha's desire to get married to Rajan never

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conversation, the filmmakers were perhaps avoiding the chances of the reference to the 'organized Christians' – coming from a negative character – attaining any sort of positive resonances in the film, released during the changed political context of *Vimochana Samaram*. In a nationalist integrationist narrative, a community working towards strengthening itself does not deserve a mention.

[20] Radhakrishnan (2006: 162). See his thesis (ibid: 160-64) for an analysis of Rajan's character in the film as negotiating the upper caste man's position in the Communist revolutionary project.

materializes, because of the latter's wayward life. However, her romantic interest in Rajan has a different purpose altogether in the narrative. Radha's love and affection for Rajan throughout the film, in spite of her marriage and the latter's rebellious lifestyle, functions mainly as a narrative mechanism to evoke a feeling of sympathy for a protagonist who, having been wronged by circumstances, leads an anarchic life. It, thus, works as a crucial device – supplementing the strategies of casting Sathyan in the role – to direct the audience's sympathy towards Rajan, the 'prodigal son' who is to be redeemed in the end.

There is a fascinating sequence in the film that captures well the dynamics of the film's acknowledgment as well as subordination of the woman's subjectivity, the elaboration of which had to be put off in favour of the theme of nationalist social progress based on class revolution achieved through the contract between men of different castes. The casting of Ambika, an actress known for her dancing skills, in the role of Radha, who is barred by her husband from dancing, is significant here. In the second half of the film, on Radha's birthday, Chellamma, the Dalit woman, expresses her wish to see the former dancing. Radha tells Chellamma that not only is she not allowed to dance, she is living a wretched life, which the latter would not understand. Radha says: "I have a rich husband, a mansion to stay in, plenty of food to eat, and lots of dresses to wear. [But] will you believe me if I say I do not have a life? I am not supposed to enjoy the fresh air; there is a fan at home! I am not allowed to listen to the songs [of nature];

there is a radio at home! I can dance behind closed doors; but nobody should watch, my husband has no desire to watch me dance either!" Radha then invites Chellamma home, saying that she would like to dance for one last time – her last wish – with only the latter as the audience. The scene shifts to Radha's house, where she dances before Chellamma to the poignant, melancholic song '*potti chirikkaruthe chilanke*' ("O anklets! Please do not burst into laughter, clinging on to my tender feet"; written by P Bhaskaran, composed by Baburaj) (See Fig. iv.3).

This sequence appears at a stage in the film when the narrative has almost completely exhausted the functions that Radha's character could achieve. Romance has just started blooming between Rajan and Chellamma; Rajan has mellowed down, beginning to emerge as a figure evoking sympathy from the audience (whose identification for the former was earlier mediated through Radha's love for him). The plot has become preoccupied entirely with setting up the stage for Rajan's self-sacrifice to save Vasu (effecting the contract between men of various castes), and thus uniting the communities in the class revolutionary project. There are no avenues left in the film for the elaboration of the woman's subjectivity. In this context, Radha's dance is a suicidal gesture, articulated partly in despair, partly in protest. Significantly, mid-way through the dance, the melancholic song suddenly gains tempo – with percussion instruments gaining prominence and the music conveying the raging fury of the destructive Hindu goddess – and Radha transforms into the powerful goddess

'Kaali' for a moment. (See Fig. iv.4). The last lines of the song are noteworthy: "Let me dance for one last time; the curtain is about to fall."

Figure iv.3

Figure iv.4

Figure iv.3: Radha dances before Chellamma, fulfilling her last wish. **Figure iv.4:** Radha transforms momentarily into 'Kaali'. **Source:** *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (Ramu Kariat, 1961).

Importantly, it should be noted that Radha is present even in some of the scenes following this sequence, thus indicating that the death alluded to here is not Radha's physical death, but rather, the closure of the question of woman's subjectivity by a narrative of social reform that postpones its engagement with this question. The fledging 'women's cinema' was thus being acknowledged by offering it a space for momentarily registering its presence and protest.[21]

[21] That Radha's performance takes place before Chellamma as the only audience does not indicate it was the exchange between the upper caste woman and the Dalit woman. What Chellamma stands for, in the film, is *not* the Dalit woman's subjectivity. Rather, Chellamma, like Neeli in *Neelakkuyil*, (both played by Miss Kumari) signifies the film's strategy of feminizing the Dalits so that they can be *represented* by the high caste male protagonist, whom the former is shown as (symbolically) identifying with completely. When Chellamma falls in love with Rajan – a romance that is not to be consummated anyway – what it signifies is the de-classing/de-casting of the upper caste man, legitimizing his position within the revolutionary project and authorizing

The theme of integrating the Malayali nation, which was falling apart into distinct communal segments, using martyr narratives found fuller elaboration in *Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi,* another film based on one of Thoppil Bhasi's plays. It tells the story of an engineer who sacrifices his life for the nation. Sukumaran (Sathyan) is an honest and patriotic engineer committed to the nation's progress. After his studies in Europe, he is assigned the job of looking into the possibilities of building new dams and hydro-electric power projects near Mulankavu, a drought-affected village in Kerala. The report he submits to the government proposes that the height of one of the existing dams near the village can be increased by another 10 ft., which will solve the water scarcity in the village and enhance agricultural production, and that the site is suitable for building the state's biggest hydro-electric power station. The existing dam was built under the supervision of Sukumaran's father-in-law, the Superintendent Engineer (Kottayam Chellappan), who had borne all the expenses of the former's education in Europe. However Sukumaran soon finds himself in a dilemma as he realizes that his father-in-law had accepted money and land as bribe from Johnson (Kottarakkara Sridharan Nair), a plantation owner, for compromising on

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him to speak for the subaltern. In this sense, Chellamma stands for the feminized Dalit community – a crucial representational strategy in the tale of social reform to be achieved through the contract between men of various castes. Hence, Radha's suicidal gesture in front of Chellamma should be seen as a protest against this tale of *male social contract*, in which the woman's subjectivity *at large* (irrespective of its caste specificities) was sidelined. Nevertheless, the default choice of the upper caste woman as representing *the* woman's subjectivity is one among the several factors instrumental in erasing the Dalit woman's subjectivity from the articulations of the woman's subjectivity, in cinema as well as in other domains, as scholars like Tharu and Niranjana (1996), Rege (1998) and Rowena (2005) have pointed out. It is not surprising, then, to note that what Radha says about her wretched life is markedly a description of the upper caste woman's issues.

the dam's height as it was being built. Sukumaran's report suggests that if the height of the dam is increased, hundreds of acres of Johnson's estate would be inundated, and that the dam was built in its current altitude simply to protect the estate owner's interest. Sukumaran is also told by his father-in-law that his education in Europe would not have been possible had he not accepted the bribes that Johnson offered. In order to avoid the trauma of implicating his own father-in-law, Sukumaran decides to resign the job. His wife Usha (B S Saroja) also faces the dilemma of having to take sides between her father and her husband. Ultimately, Usha decides to support her husband's endeavours and prevents him from resigning from his job by reminding him of an engineer's duties to the country.

Meanwhile, Shankaran Kutty Nair (T S Muthaiah), a farmer, social activist and a popular figure in Mulankavu, manages to bring the villagers together to build a canal which will bring water to the paddy fields in the village, but they find it difficult to get government approval for the work, mainly due to the indifference of the Superintendent Engineer, Sukumaran's father-in-law. Later, Sukumaran, with the help of Shankaran Kutty Nair, mobilizes the labourers in the village to agree to work towards the canal's construction for half the usual labour charge. Johnson, with the help of Unnithan, a local feudal lord, tries to divide the villagers on the issue, but ultimately Sukumaran manages to unite the villagers

in agreement. The villagers, across castes and communities, begin the construction of the dam and the canal under Sukumaran's supervision.

To sabotage all these plans and to turn the villagers against Sukumaran, Johnson plants a bomb at the construction site, which kills many, including Shankaran Kutty Nair's father Kunju Nair (Thoppil Krishnapillai). Sukumaran suffers critical injuries. Despite his injuries, Sukumaran refuses to leave the site, which motivates the villagers to carry on with the work. Later, following the hints provided by the servant at the house of the Superintendent Engineer, the police arrests Johnson and the Superintendent. Sukumaran succumbs to his injuries and is buried at the construction site as per his will. In order to fulfill Sukumaran's last wish, the villagers, under Shankaran Kutty Nair's leadership, finish the construction of the canal, and erect a memorial for the martyr.

The fear of disaggregation looms large all through the film, as each initiative for collective action faces the threat of being wrecked by various dissenting sections of the population. It opens with the silly brawls between Kunju Nair's family and the Christian family (Mathayi and Eliyamma) in the neighborhood; Nanu, the Ezhava labourer, initially objects to Sukumaran's request to the labourers in the village to work for the canal construction for half the labour charge; half the villagers are pawns in the hands of the local feudal lord; Mathayi turns against Sukumaran when his wife Eliyamma dies in the bomb explosion during the dam

construction, etc. What the narrative labours at is to unify all these disintegrating segments around the patriotic martyr figure of Sukumaran, the engineer. The Left's typical obsession with narratives of caste egalitarianism and class revolution is kept aside in favour of the theme of regional/national integration. This integrationist agenda becomes most visible in one of the scenes immediately following the bomb explosion at the dam construction site. Distressed to see his wife dead in the explosion, Mathayi slaps Sukumaran, accusing him of killing innocent people in the name of development. Soon, it becomes clear that the explosion was the handiwork of the villains. Mathayi repents his impulsive action. Sukumaran forgives him, and asks him to bury his wife's body at the church. Mathayi refuses, insisting that he and his wife would rather consider the canal construction site as their church. Coming at a time when the heat and the dust of *Vimochana Samaram* had not yet settled, the Christians signified the insurgent segments par excellence, more than any other dissenting sections of the population.

For the first time in Thoppil Bhasi's plays and films, in *Puthiya Akasham, Puthiya Bhoomi*, we see a certain investment in the state-led program of scientific modernization, thus moving away from the optimistic visions of envisaging a modern, rational 'nation' dependent largely on the agendas of self-reformation (of the high castes) and class revolution (by, or on behalf of, the working class). Casting the prominent star Sathyan in the role of the patriotic engineer, who

mobilizes the villagers and sacrifices his life while carrying out his duty, indicates the integrationist narrative's dependence on the charisma of the nation-state's visions of scientific modernization in order to unite the people into one. The discourse of the modernising state is deployed for mobilizing the villagers, and to curb the powers of the plantation-owner Johnson as well as the local feudal lord – two forces that are shown as disrupting the peace and communal harmony of the peasant village.[22]

Voices of disillusionment against this nationalist vision of scientific social modernization are to be suppressed and silenced, at least for the time being. The conversation between Usha and her engineer husband Sukumaran, who refuses to leave the construction site despite his fatal injuries from the blast, is noteworthy here. In this scene, Usha sits beside her bed-ridden husband, and sings sorrowfully, in anticipation of the tragedy that is to befall on her, as Sukumaran will have to sacrifice his life in the project of nation-building:

"There are machines to traverse the skies,

to reach the moon, and to kill a human being.

[22] The spatial imagination of the region as a harmonious rural peasant economy – with strong resemblances to the Gandhian idea of the stable, reproducible, self-sufficient Indian villages – is striking, especially coming from Thoppil Bhasi, the quintessential Left writer. The film opens with the visuals of the peasants working on the fields while singing and dancing to the tunes of a 'folk' song, thus *rendering physical labour as pleasurable* – an aspect which was rather absent in the earlier Left films. Of course, strategies of framing the working class using 'folk' rhythms and tunes were employed in the earlier plays and films made under the Left initiative as well. For example, in *Neelakkuyil* and *Mudiyanaya Puthran*, we see the lower caste workers and labourers singing and dancing after a day's work, etc. Needless to say romantic, this served primarily as a device to mark the lower caste / class spaces as vibrant, but by displacing the radical potentials of their enthusiasm to joyfulness, harmony and innocence.

But there is no machine in the whole world

that can cure the heart's pains;

There is no science for that!"

Hearing this, Sukumaran tries to console her by saying: "No matter how educated, a woman always remains a woman. She will not tolerate anything that threatens to harm her husband and children. But do you remember what you told me once about the duties of an engineer? I am following that advice word by word. Aren't you happy?" Usha then apologizes, asking for forgiveness if she has said something to prevent Sukumaran from carrying out his duties as an engineer. Thus, Usha's disillusionment with the project of nation-building and scientific social modernization, as well as her desires to consummate the marriage, are to be subordinated and sacrificed in favour of the narrative's integrationist logic.

The film has an interesting subplot, which could be understood as a narrative ploy designed to tame the seceding woman's cinema. Shankaran Kutty Nair's sisters are trained dancers. They perform at festivals, and their earning is a major support for the peasant family. However, their association with art and public performance brings disrepute to the family, and the villagers look at their activities with suspicion. Ponnamma (Ragini), the eldest of the sisters, is married to Gopu (Bahadur), an aspiring film actor and an irresponsible husband. Gopu wants Ponnamma (whom he has renamed as Latika Devi in anticipation of a

career that she is going to have in cinema) to sell off her share in the family and relocate to Madras. Ponnamma's father Kunju Nair does not approve of this; neither is Ponnamma ambitious about a career in films in Madras. But her younger sister Rajamma (Leela) is keen on leaving the village and joining cinema. Meanwhile, Johnson tells Gopu that he intends to produce a film. Gopu convinces Rajamma about the glamorous future that awaits her in cinema and persuades her to leave with him to Johnson's bungalow where the rehearsals would take place. Both of them run away. Soon, Rajamma realizes that cinema's promises were false. Later, she escapes from the bungalow when Johnson attempts to rape her. She goes back to the village and falls at the feet of her brother Shankaran Kutty Nair.

The subplot primarily serves the purpose of containing the seceding women's desires/women's cinema. Casting plays a major role here. Ragini, one of the most prominent stars of the Malayalam film industry during the time, is cast in the role of Ponnamma, the eldest of the dancer sisters, who, despite the tortures from her husband, does *not* want to go to Madras and have a career in cinema. Interestingly, the renowned comedian Bahadur plays the role of Ponnamma's husband Gopu, the aspiring actor who, totally disenchanted with "country" life, dreams of a life in the city and a career in cinema. He is an object of constant ridicule in the film for his naïve belief in the deceptive charms of the city and cinema. Though Rajamma falls for Gopu's words and leaves her family to have a

career in cinema, she soon realizes that cinema's charms are illusory. The words of Shankaran Kutty Nair, who accepts the repenting Rajamma back into the fold of the family, indicate the integrationist impulse that binds the main theme of the film with its sub-plot about cinema, in both of which martyrdom figures prominently. He says: "It was to water the charred paddy fields that my father died; it was in the world of art that my sisters were wounded. One day, the charred fields will be green with life; and the impurities staining art will soon fade away." What the subplot suggests, then, is not the disavowal of cinema, but a reformation of its aesthetics in consonance with the middle class worldview and the integrationist ideology.

Besides, the subplot on cinema also allows the film to both incorporate the elements that are considered as attracting the mass audience, like the dance performances featuring female stars, and also to subordinate them by strategies of framing. The film introduces the dancer-duo Ponnamma and Rajamma – whom Gopu refers to as 'Latika Devi sisters' – as they are performing in their house, with Gopu as the audience. The performance is reminiscent of the dance sequences featuring the Travancore-sisters trio, Lalita-Padmini-Ragini, which used to be included as major attractions in the formula films of the period. However, the viewers in this film are offered a distanced spectatorial position from this element of spectacle (that breaks the linear progression of the narrative) through strategies of framing and disavowal. The performance is framed

through the look of Gopu, who is shown as enjoying the performance (See Figures iv.5-iv.6). This sequence, clearly evoking the spectacles of mass cinema, is to be disavowed soon, as Kunju Nair, the father, comes home and asks the dancers to stop the performance, much to Gopu's displeasure. Similar strategies of incorporation and subordination of spectacles associated with mass cinema are deployed throughout the film.

Figure iv.5

Figure iv.6

Figures iv.5-iv.6: The framing of the mass cinema's spectacles, as Ponnamma (Ragini) and Rajamma (Leela), the dancer-sisters, perform before Gopu (Bahadoor), the aspiring actor and an object of ridicule. **Source:** *Puthiya Akasham, Puthiya Bhoomi* (M S Mani, 1962)

On top of it all, there is a public performance sequence, imaging a prototype of the united Malayali nation, towards the end of the film, which clearly specifies and proposes the integrationist aesthetics as the ideal model of cinema/art that is to be emulated. One night, some of the villagers engaged in the canal construction come together under the leadership of Shankaran Kutty Nair and

perform a *Harikatha*[23] to entertain the rest of the labourers. Shankaran Kutty Nair, the lead singer, chooses the Ramayana episode in which Ravana, having captured Hanuman, is about to set fire to the latter's tail, even as Vibheeshana, Ravana's brother, cautions him against this. As the musical rendition of the conversations between Ravana and his brother progresses, Mammootty (S P Pillai), a prominent Muslim character in the film, suddenly bursts out singing – evoking the tune of a Mappila song and using the 'Muslim' dialect – describing the troubles that Hanuman's tail, once set afire, can cause to Ravana's Lanka. Much to the pleasure of the public and Shankaran Kutty Nair, Mammootty improvises on the lyrics, deploying the 'Malabar Muslim' dialectical usages and dropping in English words like 'fire-engine' in his singing. It, thus, clearly proposes the aesthetics of integration as ideal, where the seceding sections of the population are sought to be brought back and accommodated within the overarching structure of the nationalist discourse, thus containing the threats of segmentation.

In the dominant history of Malayalam cinema, the thriving commercial film industry that emerged in Malayalam by the late 1950s has been understood as a 'conservative backlash' and as the result of the return of various retrogressive elements into the public sphere. For example, a Left-sympathizing critic writes:

[23] *Harikatha* is a public musical performance in which a troupe of singers, led by a lead singer, recounts the tales from Hindu epics. Improvisations, vernacularization and contemporarizations of lyrics are considered some of the major attractions of this public entertainment form.

> The neorealist masterpieces [like, *Navalokam* (1951), *Neelakkuyi* (1954), *Newspaper Boy* (1955), *Rarichan Enna Pawran* (1956) and *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (1961)], which combined artistic power with trenchant social criticism, were the high water marks achieved by Malayalam cinema, never to be surpassed in subsequent years. In the early sixties, we find the gradual emergence of what can be termed an 'ultra-conservative backlash'. Emerging rather shamefacedly from the murky aftermath of the infamous *Vimochana Samaram*, the 'backlash' has cleverly exploited the schisms within the Left and the lacunae in their programmes. [...] A related phenomenon which has also played a crucial role in the cultural transformation described above is the emergence in the early sixties of a culture industry with its twin bases in Kottayam (purveying pulp fiction) and Kodambakkam (commercial films). [...] Diffuse in nature and multifarious in its forms, revivalism can be seen to be characterized by its nostalgia for the feudal past, particularly the upper caste cultural mores, its fatal fascination for the world of rituals, its religiosity verging on obscurantism and its whole-hearted acceptance of the jargon of spirituality. (Ramachandran 1997: 10-1)

This account points towards the Left's failure to grasp the significance of the questions raised by various sections of the population against its nationalist cultural vision that marginalized the affects of faith, romance, sentiment etc. The commercial film industry of the early 1960s tried to engage with, in surreptitious ways and often by commodifying, these affects and their energies which were relegated to the margins of social realism. Delegitimizing these desires and anxieties as retrogressive, the Left resorted to the rhetoric of nationalist social

progress through integration. As a concluding note to this chapter, I would propose that it is by responding to these two pulls – of delegitimization (in the social realism of the Left) and commodification (in the commercial cinema) of the excesses and energies of religious faith, romantic love, sentimentality, sensual desires, etc. – that an emerging set of writers and filmmakers attempted to evolve new aesthetic registers and industrial formulas during the 1960s and the 1970s. It would be worthwhile examining the films of directors like A Vincent, KS Sethumadhavan, M Krishnan Nair, Sasikumar, PA Backer, etc., in this light. In the next chapter, I discuss *Bhargaveenilayam* (The Haunted House: A Vincent, 1964) as an attempt that tried to offer a systematic critique of the secular, rationalist notions of social realism, as well as the commercial cinema's tendency to commodify and exhaust the energies of the affects that were marginalized in the Left's cultural vision.

Chapter V

The Phantoms of Faith and Sentiment: *Bhargaveenilayam* as a Political Film

In the region's socio-political scenario during the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the cultural-political context of *Vimochana Samaram* exemplified basically two undercurrents: 1.) the disillusionment of various sections of the population with the rationalist discourse that the Left proposed; 2.) the suspicions put forward by the religious minority communities against the Hindu majoritarian interests lurking behind the dominant ideas of secularism and rationality as well as the agendas of nationalization. Moreover, if the emergence of generic tendencies like 'the women's cinema' indicates anything, the social-reformist narratives of caste egalitarianism and class revolution effected through the contract between men of various castes/communities, were not appealing to large sections of women as well. The modern Malayali nation envisaged by the Left was disintegrating into segments.

By the early 1960s, while the operations of Udaya and Merryland studios facilitated a flourishing commercial cinema in Malayalam by making films that addressed the fragmented sections of the audience, by commodifying their subjectivities and gratifying their desires indirectly, the Left-affiliated artists

initiated attempts to mould a middle aesthetics of integration that strove to bring together the seceding audience segments under the overarching structure of nationalist social progress, by deploying martyr narrative. However, this middle aesthetics of integration declined to address, in any significant manner, the basic contestations that were raised against the modernist rationalist discourse envisaged by the Left as the basis of Malayali nationalism. The dominant Left failed to clearly grasp the significance of the dissents that led to the 'disintegration' of the Malayali nation, and refused to address many of them as legitimate. As our analysis of some of the films that employed the middle aesthetics of integration suggests, faced with discontents emerging from within the region, the Left did not have any new agendas to propose other than the rhetoric of the need to transcend caste and communal boundaries and unite as subjects of the modern Malayali nation in order to ensure social progress. Besides, the centrality of the Hindu upper caste male in the cultural imagination of the Left did not undergo any significant transformation.

On the other hand, the dissenting forces against the modernist rationalist discourse of the Left too did not have an alternative democratic imaginary to propose, other than reinstating the political structure that existed in the region during the first decades of the Twentieth Century, where various caste and religious communities operated as pressure groups, competing with each other for public resources and political representation, often by building expedient

political alliances with other sections and appealing to the state. The Leftist discourse of modernity and rationality, however, retained a dominant position, its positivism rendering the voices of disillusionment as illegitimate and closing off all possibilities of engaging with them. The choices before the dissenting voices were limited: they could resort to surreptitious ways of indulging in and gratifying their subjectivities and desires, or face existential crisis (inextricably linked to individuation and artistic/intellectual reflection), until they are able to articulate their dissent in universal registers, matching the grandeur of the modernist, rationalist discourse that it contests and challenges.

It is against this political-cultural backdrop that I discuss *Bhargaveenilayam* (The Haunted House: A Vincent, 1964) as an endeavor that systematically enunciated the disillusionment with the rationalist vision of the Left that marginalized and delegitimized various aspects of life, like religious faith, fantasy, romance, sensual desires, sentimentality, etc. The film firmly rejected the Left's positivist rationalist discourse as well as the dominant nationalist imagination centred on the Hindu upper caste male figure, and posited a radically different worldview where the energies of faith, fantasy, romance, sentiment, etc. have a legitimate space in the social-cultural imaginary. In the following section, I try to read the film as a conscious attempt to engage with the (popular) domain of 'irrational' beliefs, excesses of sentimentality, energies of romance and sensual desires, etc., and mould a radically different worldview out of it, by critiquing and moving

away from the tendencies of commodifying them, and even of constantly indulging in the pursuit of the uncanny and the mysterious.

The directorial debut of A Vincent, *Bhargaveenilayam* is written by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, combining elements from a number of short stories of his own, but the main thread is developed out of his short story titled *Neelavelicham* (The Blue Light).[1] The (*nameless*) protagonist (Madhu) is an aspiring novelist, who comes to stay in a desolate mansion on the outskirts of a beach-side town. He soon learns from his friends and others that the house is haunted by the ghost of a young, beautiful woman named Bhargavi (Vijaya Nirmala), who used to live there and is believed to have committed suicide by jumping into the well in the courtyard of the mansion. All of them try to dissuade him from staying in the house. The novelist, however, tries to befriend the ghost by striking up conversations with her. The ghost makes its presence felt, as the gramophone starts playing on its own and objects move around in the house. Gradually, the novelist gets interested in knowing and writing the real story of Bhargavi.

The novelist begins his story based on the accounts provided by his friends about Bhargavi's life and the letters that he discovers from a secret box that she had

[1] *Bhargaveenilayam* is the only film Basheer scripted. His most important works were written between 1943 and 1968. See also Udaya Kumar (1999, 2005) and Ramakrishnan (2011) for discussions on Basheer's works. Ramakrishnan observes that "Basheer was one of the first Malayalam writers to recognize that the nation-state […] functioned as a massive impersonal machine which is insensitive to the interests of the people" (2011: 108).

kept. As it turns out, Bhargavi had fallen in love with Sasi Kumar (Prem Nazir), a poet and musician who came to stay in her neighbourhood. Bhargavi is believed to have committed suicide after Sasi Kumar abandoned her and left the place. However, the novelist realizes that his narrative is not accurate, as the ghost intervenes and burns the half-written story. He becomes even more curious. The ghost helps the novelist in his search for clues by providing crucial hints at various points. He finds a newspaper from Bhargavi's secret box which carried the news about an unidentified man who was found dead on a train. It turns out that the dead body was of Sasi Kumar, who, according to the newspaper report, might have committed suicide out of despair due to love failure. The novelist's further enquiries reveal that both Bhargavi and Sasi Kumar were killed.

The writer finally unravels the truth: Nanukkuttan alias MN (P J Antony), Bhargavi's cousin, was in love with Bhargavi and was determined to marry her. Hearing the news about the latter's love for Sasi Kumar, Nanukkuttan makes plans to bring an end to the romance between Bhargavi and Sasi Kumar. As Bhargavi refuses to marry him, Nanukkuttan poisons Sasi Kumar, who was on his way to Lucknow to learn Hindustani music. He then informs Bhargavi that her lover is no more, in the hope that she would forget about her lover and marry him. A furious Bhargavi attacks Nanukkuttan. In the scuffle that ensues, Nanukuttan pushes Bhargavi into the well and kills her. He then spreads the news that Bhargavi committed suicide by jumping into the well.

As the novelist reads out his narrative to the ghost, who by then had become quite compassionate towards him, the film shows the life of Bhargavi reconstructed according to the novelist's account. Nanukkuttan overhears the story and wants to destroy the novelist. The final dual between the novelist and Nanukkuttan shows both of them tumbling into the well. Nanukkuttan falls and dies, but the novelist escapes narrowly, almost miraculously, giving a hint that Bhargavi's ghost helped him escape. The novelist considers Nanukkuttan's death as the will of God. In the end, the writer wishes Bhargavi's ghost a happy reunion with her deceased lover. The loud laughter of Bhargavi's ghost resounds over the end title.

The first thing that one would notice about the film is its grandeur, almost gaining epic proportions, indicating an aspiration to evolve something radically new out of the resources of 'horror cinema' – a genre which still circulates at the margins of the mainstream film industries all over the world, and one that did not emerge even as a prominent marginal genre in the case of Indian cinema till the late 1970s.[2] The film had a high profile star cast with Prem Nazir, Madhu, Vijaya Nirmala, PJ Antony and Adoor Bhasi playing the lead characters;

[2] In her study of the Hindi horror films of Ramsay brothers made mostly during the 1980s, Valentina Vitali observes: "In India, horror films are like a glitch in the system: none seems to have been made throughout the history of Indian cinemas except between the late 1970s and the early 1990, when the genre saw a brief moment of glory with the Hindi productions of the Ramsay brothers. […] These films never occupied the centre ground of cinema in India. Like much horror cinema elsewhere, they were cheaply produced films that circulated at the margins of the industry" (Vitali 2011: 77-8).

produced by T K Pareekkutty, it pooled in some of the best talents in the industry – P Bhaskaran as the lyricist and Baburaj as the music composer; it imports elements from a vast range of genres, like horror cinema, the romance drama and the suspense thrillers. It stood apart starkly among the horror films made in India till then, also as a film that, in the words of a later commentator, "confirms the existence of supernatural powers unlike some of the early Indian films in this genre" ('Old is Gold', *The Hindu*, 16 November, 2009).[3]

Making no attempt to explain away the supernatural, the film unambiguously rejects the rationalist notions propagated by the Left as well as the modern nation-state.[4] The discontent with the secularist ideals (that proposes a model of public life where religious belief is relegated to the margins, if not delegitimized, as in the Leftist ideology) is evident as well, as the protagonist evokes God as 'the supreme power' in the beginning and at the end of the film, but importantly, by taking meticulous care not to invoke one of a particular religion, as well as by not divulging the religious background of the protagonist. We do not have to

[3] The article says: "Even suspense thrillers of the period, which can also be classified under the 'ghost story' group, did not deal with 'real' ghosts. For example Hindi films like 'Bees Saal Baad' (1962), 'Woh Kaun Thi' (1964), 'Kohra' (1964) had heroines in disguise as ghosts. But in 'Bhargavi Nilayam,' the audience, for the first time in Indian cinema, were told about the existence of the supernatural." ('Old is Gold', *The Hindu*, 16 November, 2009). Vitali also discusses Hindi films like *Mahal* (Kamal Amrohi, 1949) and *Woh Kain Thi?* (Raj Khosla, 1964) as films that customarily dealt with notions of the supernatural in a "rationalist and secular manner" (2011: 84).

[4] *Neelavelicham* ('The Blue Light'), the story on which the main theme of the film is based, begins like this: "This is the story of one of the miraculous incidents of my life. No, let us not call it an incident. Let us rather call it a bubble of miracle. I have tried to pierce it with the needle of scientific logic. But I have not succeeded in bursting it. Perhaps you might. You might even be able to analyse and explain it. I called this a miraculous incident… yes, what else can I call it?"

labour much to establish that the film rejected the hegemonic notions of empiricism. More interesting for our analysis is what it does with the resources and energies of popular genres which were relegated to the margins of the socialist realist cinema.

Significantly, the film begins by firmly positioning itself in the domain of the popular. In the very beginning of the film, as the credits are being rolled, we are shown the abandoned mansion from various angles at night, through a mobile camera. We are asked to register the presence of a terrifying, mysterious entity in the mansion, as we see rays of light emanating from the windows and doors being opened and shut by an invisible force, with the accompaniment of the heightened background score and the loud laughter of a woman. A stranger (who, we later realize, is Nanukkuttan) opens the gates and approaches the mansion. Soon, we get to see the ghost itself – not a deformed non-/human figure, but a woman wearing angelic white clothes and a fierce, accusatory look in her eyes – as it appears in front of the mansion to scare the stranger away. The stranger flees, the background score mellows down, and the scene fades out, as the opening credits come to a close.

Having firmly positioned itself in the domain of the popular in the beginning itself, the film then engages in a maneuvering of the affects circulating in the realm of the popular to evolve a radically new worldview out of it, by distancing

from the attempts to commodify and exhaust such affects. It is by dragging the middle class protagonist into this domain of popular beliefs, and using his subjective viewpoint to explore and derive meanings out of this muddled ground, that the film partly achieves this task. In the first shot after the opening credits, we see the protagonist approaching the mansion with his belongings on rikshaws; on the soundtrack is the music familiar to the audience as typically used when the landscape or the characters in a rural/semi-urban backdrop is introduced in Malayalam cinema. He soon comes across rumours and frightening stories about the mansion, Bhargavi and her ghost. His initial reaction to the rumours that circulate in the town is that of suspicion. However, he does not dismiss them completely, but, being a lonely artist struggling for survival, he decides to befriend the ghost, if one actually exists, through imaginary conversations with it. After spending a night at the mansion alone, he becomes confident that either there is no ghost, or even if there is one, he can negotiate with it,[5] so that the ghost does not trouble him much. The strategy is of peaceful co-existence. However, feeling lonely, and being totally disillusioned with the rationalist worldview as well as with the avenues of indulging in the (commodified) conduits of 'sensual desires'[6], the novelist finds the story of the

[5] When his friends tell him that the ghost is that of an educated woman, the protagonist says: "Oh, it is a woman? And an educated one? She will definitely understand me."

[6] Here, I am invoking the lines from the song '*Ekanthathayude Apaaratheeram'* in the film – one of the most popular songs of disillusionment from Malayalam cinema, written by P Bhaskaran, composed by Baburaj and sung by Kamukara Purushothaman. The last stanza of the song goes like this: "The bruises of knowledge you bear / and in the winged senses you float; / Blinding

ghost more fascinating than the world outside, and withdraws into it. (See also Figure v.1)

Figure v.1: "The bruises of knowledge you bear / and in the winged senses you float; / Blinding desires depleted / you arrive, at the sublime shore of solitude." Frame-shot from the song, '*Ekanthathayude Apaaratheeram*', conveying the disillusionment with rationalist visions and the solitude of artistic / intellectual introspection. **Source:** *Bhargaveenilayam* (A Vincent, 1964).

The protagonist develops a romantic (both in the utopian sense as well as denoting sexual desire) interest in the ghost; and various incidents push him into wanting to know her story. Deploying the textual strategies of a detective story

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desires depleted / you arrive, at the sublime shore of solitude" (I thank Prabha Zacharias for helping me with the translation).

(i.e., subjective camera, inviting audience identification with the central character in the film, etc.), the film takes us on an exploration into the world of the ghost and her real story. Thus, the enterprise of truth-seeking or even demystification is central to the film, but this is appropriated to offer a new worldview, by subverting the conventional modes of resolving the mysteries within the secular and rationalist notions of cause and effect. In fact, the attempt was to demystify and retrieve the realm of the mysterious, the enigmatic and the incomprehensible so as to reclaim it and deploy it to construct a new vision about life.

Having positioned itself in the domain of the popular and engaging with the affects circulating in it, the film, however, mounts a sharp criticism of the practices of commodifying the desires of the dissenting subjectivities and offering them avenues of surreptitious gratification. For example, the film's contempt for the popular 'Christian / Muslim socials' comes across explicitly and sharply in the sequences that show Bhargavi's life, constructed according to the novelist's narration. Kuthiravattam Pappu (Pappu), the servant at Bhargavi's house, is also a playwright. One day he describes to Bhargavi the plot of one of his latest plays, titled, "The Heroine Who Absconded with the Villain". He starts: "The curtain rises. The hero applies soap on his face and gets ready to shave, but he realizes that he is out of blades! The heroine goes out to buy a blade. She, however, does not return even after a long time. The hero goes in search of the

heroine. He reaches the tea shop of Mammoonj. In front of the tea shop, we can see the rikshaw of Ouseph."

At this moment, Pappu pauses, and asks Bhargavi: "You must have definitely noticed the *venthingam*[7] that Ouseph wears?"

An already uninterested Bhargavi nods.

Pappu continues: "Mammoonj tells the hero that [mimicking the Muslim dialect] 'the heroine has absconded with the villain'! The hero gets ready to trace the villain on Ouseph's rikshaw. Mammoonj tells the hero [again mimicking the Muslim dialect] 'why don't you have a tea and then go'?"

Pappu pauses again, takes out a full-sleeved blouse (in which Muslim women would typically be shown in the Muslim socials), hums the tune of a Mappila song, and says: "At this moment, wearing this blouse, Mammoonj's wife will come out and serve the tea!" Pappu stops his story, seeing that Bhargavi is clearly not amused.

On another occasion, Pappu tells Sasi Kumar that his latest play, though yet to be finished, has already been advertised saying that it will show 'the Muslim blouse' (which he calls 'box-office') and 'the Christian *venthinga*'. Pappu adds that he has managed to get hold of a 'Muslim blouse' to be used in his play by

[7] *Venthinga* or *venthingam* is the Malayalam term for the amulet / talisman, made of thin black thread, that Syrian Christians in Kerala wear traditionally. Showing a character wearing *venthingam* is a continued practice in Malayalam cinema to mark him / her as Syrian Christian.

stealing one from a woman who was taking bath in the river; now he is in search of a *venthinga*!

Using the comic playwright's character, the film was mounting a sharp criticism of the practice in the commercial 'Christian / Muslim socials' to commodify the desires and anxieties of the minority religious communities in the region, at a time the modernist, rationalist discourse proposed by the dominant Left relegated religious belief to the margins of public life, even while the Hindu interests were smuggled in and accommodated into the dominant ideas of secularism. It alleges that, most often, in the 'Christian / Muslim socials', the plot was just a ruse to highlight and commodify the ethnic markers and the cultural traits associated with particular religious communities, thus appealing to the audiences from these sections of the population by offering covert avenues for gratifying their desires and anxieties.

Besides, the textual strategies in the film indicate an obligation to distance itself from the familiar tropes used in horror films, even while positively positioning itself in the genre. For example, it has an interesting moment when religious iconography – deployed often in the films of this genre to evoke horror – is briefly used, appropriated, and rendered obsolete. This scene also unfolds in the sequence that shows Bhargavi's life constructed according to the novelist's account. One night, when Nanukkuttan tries to shoot him, Sasi Kumar runs for

his life. He jumps over a wall and lands in a Christian graveyard (though we, the audience, are not shown it immediately). At first, we see a frightened expression on Sasi Kumar's face, as if he saw something scary; this is accompanied by the screaming voice of a woman – a typical device to evoke horror in the films of this genre at each moment of anticipation. This is followed by a cut to the graveyard, with the camera slowly panning over the tombs, displaying the crosses on them prominently. We realize that it is (just) a cemetery. The soundtrack mellows down a bit; cut back to Sasi Kumar; we see him *taking a relieved breath*. We, then, see Sasi Kumar moving into the bushes; we hear him wrestling with someone. Soon, Sasi Kumar comes out of the bushes, as if he just defeated somebody in a tussle in the bushes. Sasi Kumar gets out of the cemetery and runs away. Cut back to the cemetery. The soundtrack is totally silent. As the camera pans the cemetery, we see a buffalo coming out of the bushes crying, but calmly (the soundtrack still remaining quiet), as if to give enough time for the camera to capture it, so as to make it clear that it was just a buffalo that Sasi Kumar encountered in the bushes, not the vehicle of Yama – the God of death in Hindu mythology, etc. The scene fades out quietly. Though there are a number of occasions in the film that evoke horror through suspense and partial visibility, in the above scene, one can identify an extra effort to return back to the scene where the action took place and explain the mystery in a 'logical' manner. The familiar trope of religious iconography was temporarily appropriated and rendered

obsolete; the film is clearly not interested in digging up the graveyard and unearthing the familiar ghosts, exhausting the genre's resources, so to speak.

If this is the case, what was the film trying to do with a marginal genre? In fact, there are compelling evidences in the film to suggest that it laments the depleted and cluttered ground of the popular domain, and strives to retrieve the desirably utopic possibilities of the affects circulating in the domain in order to posit a radically different worldview. The romance between Bhargavi and Sasi Kumar is portrayed as an ideal world of love and passion – so utopian that it is often conceived as unattainable (See Figure iv.9). The whole flashback, showing Bhargavi's romance with Sasi Kumar – a musician, always wearing white clothes, who moves into her neighbourhood, and who is infused with the star charisma of Prem Nazir's romantic persona – has the characteristics of a fantasy sequence. Sasi Kumar is Bhargavi's *gandharva*, the ideal lover of her dreams. Here, the film is clearly appropriating the popular and marginal generic element of romance,[8] considered in the industry circles as appealing especially to women audiences. The cultural-historical significance of the popularity of films with romance as a major ingredient in Indian cinema from the 1920s has been noted by film scholars. Discussing the popularity of the 'adventure romance' films in

[8] Pulp novels, using romance as their selling point (known as *painkili* novels) and targeting primarily, though not exclusively, women readers, were emerging as popular in Malayalam by the late 1950s. As noted in the beginning of Chapter IV and also in Chapter II, a number of such novels were made into films by the late 1950s and the early 1960s. *Padatha Paingili* (P Subrahmaniam, 1957), based on Muttathu Varkey's novel of the same title, is an example. These romance dramas were deemed as inferior to socialist realist cinema/novel.

India amongst a new generation of proto-middle class young audience between the 1920s and 1940s, Kaushik Bhaumik notes:

> [The romance films were] dedicated in the main towards the formation of the romantic couple at the end of the resolution of social tension that held back the fruitful coming together of the sexes. […] Men and women had to settle scores with residual conservative habits, the siren call of the past, before they could do justice to the adventurous stirrings of the flesh and mind. But for this the social setting had to change as well. Thus was set up a long standing genre of Indian cinema – *the formation of the couple was tantamount to the setting up of a new kingdom defined by justice and harmony*. An older social order had to be shaken up, social ties loosened and made lyrical and more reciprocal, to allow for sexual adventure. (Bhaumik 2008; emphasis added)

However, as Prasad notes, when the socials emerged as a hold-all genre by the 1950s, romance could be staged "only in an embedded form, under the aegis of a compound authority of a feudal and a modern patriarchy" (1998: 95), signifying the structures of the feudal family monitoring and reining in the seceding tendencies of romance's energies. The romance ingredient, thus, continued to circulate on the margins of the popular culture in the 1950s. In the case of Malayalam cinema, towards the end of the decade, filmmakers identified the pulp novels as a ready source to adopt from in order to address and capitalize on the desires of a vast population who were disillusioned with the agendas of scientific social modernization – whether that of the nation-state or the socialists

– but who nevertheless, fantasized about radical social changes, especially the transformation of the forces that repressed the elaborations of the realms of bodily and emotive desires and experiences.

The romance ingredient, thus, signified the domain of fantasy that carries the utopian desires of the (domestic) woman (see Figures v.2-v.3) to break out of the bounds of the familial/traditional authorities (represented by Nanukkuttan and his claim on her that comes through the accepted matrilineal tradition of cross-cousin marriage in the Nair community). Bhargavi's constant immersion in this fantasy is as much a legitimate mode of envisioning social change as the socialist realism's fantasies of egalitarianism and controlled class revolution – only that the former does not have the positivist faith in the rationalist notions of cause and effect. Understood in this way, the novelist, and through him, we, the audience, are invited to explore and retrieve Bhargavi's subjectivity and the legitimacy of her fantasies as the longing for a new social-cultural imaginary where the realms of emotion, love, passion and sexual energies are not only allowed elaborations, but even become the vantage points from where social transformation can be fantasized.[9] When the dominant Left was proposing

[9] Some scholars have suggested that the deployment of 'romantic love' as a motif was central to the social realism of the Left. Analyzing the plays of KPAC, Dilip Menon observes: "While [the KPAC plays] are in a sense political plays, they are structured around love unfulfilled, thwarted or betrayed. Why is the question of politics rendered as one of affect? Social stasis, decay and inequality are captured and represented in the impossibility of love within a space as yet to become modern" (Menon 2001: 264). This, as far as I can see, is not an accurate representation of the Left's cultural interventions which, I would argue, clearly marginalized the 'affect' of

agendas of caste egalitarianism and controlled class revolution through scientific social modernization and the social consensus achieved through the contract between men of different castes and communities, the romance genre proposed a different locus to imagine democracy and a just society, where the realm of passions and emotions – which the Leftist imagination sought to delegitimize by characterizing it as an 'apolitical' domain in which women seek pleasures – was imagined as the catalyst of social change.

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romance and passion in favour of the agendas of social change based on scientific, rational thinking. The romantic love – mostly between the upper caste male protagonist and the lower caste woman – in the KPAC plays and the socialist realist films of the 1950s and the 1960s were never meant to be consummated in the first place (which the author quoted above has also acknowledged), and were mostly strategies to feminize Dalits / lower castes, so that they can be represented, or spoken for, by the upper caste male protagonist – thereby effecting the former's symbolic identification with the latter. Such romance was also deployed as a strategy of declassing / de-caste-ing the upper caste protagonist. Moreover, the women characters in these films and its romances were not attributed any agency. Thus, romance, a key ingredient of popular culture, was being appropriated for the cultural politics of the Left that privileged rationalist notions of cause and effect. In these films and plays, there is no attempt to envision social change from the locus of the energies unleashed by romance and sexual desire as such, whereas, in a popular social film like *Jeevithanowka* (K Vembu, 1951; See Chapter I for the plot) or the romance film *Padaatha Painkili* (P Subrahmaniam, 1957; See Chapter II for the plot), the consummation of romantic love between protagonists from disparate social backgrounds is *the* end of the narrative, which has to be realized through a restructuring of the existing social order. To my mind, it is important to delineate these differences in order to understand the Left's social-cultural imagination, as well as the dissenting views against them which were most often expressed and gratified in surreptitious ways in popular culture.

Figures v.2-v.3: The subject and object of the romance fantasy in *Bhargaveenilayam*. **Source:** *Bhargaveenilayam* (A Vincent, 1964).

Figure v.4: Just a touch away, yet so unattainably far… The romance between Bhargavi and Sasi Kumar. **Source:** *Bhargaveenilayam* (A Vincent, 1964).

Sasi Kumar's death, then, signifies the depletion and erosion (the inevitable outcomes of commercialization) of the domain of fantasies – the realm of hopes and escape for Bhargavi – as I shall try to demonstrate. After Sasi Kumar leaves the town promising to come back soon, we see Bhargavi noticing from her room that the house where Sasi Kumar used to stay has now been occupied by a group of young, middle class men. The clamors and noises of these young men have come to take the place of Sasi Kumar's divine music. On the night when Nanukkuttan comes to inform Bhargavi that he has poisoned Sasi Kumar, the conversation between the two is disrupted by the loud laughter and noises coming from the men across the wall, engaged in playing cards. Nanukkuttan's intentions to kill Bhargavi become clear, as the latter firmly refuses his proposal for marriage. She calls out to her mother for help as Nanukkuttan tries to attack her, but her cries are drowned in the noises coming from the neighbours. She runs towards the wall and tries to climb over it to invite the attention of the young men, who, however, are totally immersed in their game. Nanukkuttan drags her back and pushes her into the well (See Figures v.5-v.8). He also manages to escape from the scene unnoticed, as the whole atmosphere resounds with the loud conversations of the young men. The suggestion is rather clear: the space that (should have) offered utopian hopes has come to be occupied by unruliness and chaos (signified by the collective of young men) and selfish mindless indulgence (indicated by the game of cards). It not only does not help Bhargavi, but also unwittingly assists the assailant escape unnoticed.

Figure v.5

Figure v.6

Figure v.7

Figure v.8

Figure v.5: The conversation between Bhargavi and Nanukkuttan gets distracted by the noises coming from the neighbourhood. **Figure v.6:** The young men immersed in a game of cards. **Figure v.7-v.8:** Nanukkuttan drags Bhargavi back to him as she attempts to invite the attention of the young men across the wall. **Source:** *Bhargaveenilayam* (A Vincent, 1964).

After her death, Bhargavi's subjectivity and desires are irretrievably lost in the world of rumours and the scandalous tales that circulate in the public/popular domains about her. The story that is, then, impatiently waiting to be told in the desolate mansion on the shores of the sea – away from the familiar landscapes – is of Bhargavi's subjectivity that fantasized a life of utopian possibilities. The

process of retrieving Bhargavi's subjectivity and the legitimacy of her desires is precisely the process of the novelist discovering his own subjectivity that desires a worldview outside the rationalist, positivist notions. It is striking, then, to note that one of the first things that the curious novelist encounters, when he opens Bhargavi's room for the first time, is his own image in the mirror, which scares him for a moment. Moreover, towards the end, when Nanukkuttan threatens to kill the novelist for writing the true story of Bhargavi and implicating him in her murder, the novelist, with an immensely serene expression on his face, hands over the manuscript of the novel to Nanukkuttan, saying the latter is free to destroy it. Unsurprisingly, Nanukkuttan responds saying it is not the novel that he wants to destroy, but "the novelist and his brain". Thus, retrieving Bhargavi's subjectivity and the legitimacy of her desires – and in the process, enabling the novelist to realize his own subjectivity and desires – emerges as *the* end of the narrative, much more than fulfilling Bhargavi's revenge against Nanukkuttan through the protagonist.

Combining the elements of suspense thrillers with that of the horror cinema, the film subverts the basic impulses of a narrative of truth-seeking, and tries to produce a new affect. If the conventional suspense thrillers resolve a mystery, a crime or the presence of the uncanny by deploying (and thus reiterating) the rationalist, empiricist perspective, in *Bhargaveenilayam*, though every moment of revelation takes us one step closer to the 'truth', the uncanny reiterates itself at

each of these moments as well, urging us to acknowledge its presence. While the film offers all the pleasures of truth-seeking, the meaningfulness of this exercise lays not in reiterating the dominant rationalist, positivist notions by explaining away the mysterious or the fantastic, nor in indulging in the constant pursuit of the uncanny, but in striving to evolve a radically different worldview that envisions legitimate spaces for the excesses and energies of faith, romance, sentiment, fantasy and sensual desires.

Conclusion

In this project, I have attempted to examine the specificities of distinct historical agents' engagements with cinema in Kerala during and around the decade of the 1950s. The thesis seeks to contribute to the scholarship on film history in India that argues for an understanding of cinema as a cultural institution that takes on specific dimensions and significance in post-colonial societies like India. The effort in this study has been to show that the history of cinema in Kerala could provide us important insights in historically placing the region within the political-cultural map of South India and India at large, while remaining attentive to the social-historical imperatives specific to the region. Within the corpus of studies on Malayalam cinema, the project has tried to resist the impulses of looking at the cinema of the 1950s on the terms set by the contemporary academic and popular debates on Malayalam cinema. It pays attention to the specificities of cinema as an industrial-cultural medium, the energies that distinct generic elements evoke, the sedimented meanings that the body of an actor/actress acquires over a period, as well as the commercial considerations within which the industry in the region had to operate during the period, in order to evolve an understanding of the interventions of various historical agents in cinema.

The thesis begins with the attempt to construct a historical account about the political economy of 'film business' in Kerala during the 1930s and the 1940s, which serves as a backdrop to understand the textual-aesthetic elements in the early films produced by Udaya and Merryland – the first modern studios set up in Kerala by the late 1940s. Discussing a moment in *Jeevithanowka* (The Boat of Life: K Vembu, 1951), it argues for an understanding of the early studio films as 'products of *bricolage*' that combined a host of generic elements, weaved together often along manipulated links, within an overarching narrative framework that privileged the central impulses of an aesthetic of contemporaneity that lays emphasis on the notions of cause and effect in narrative progression. It then proceeds to an examination of the cultural politics of the Left-affiliated artists' interventions in popular cinema by the mid-1950s. Analyzing *Neelakkuyil* (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954), I have argued that the emphasis that the aesthetic project of social realism placed on the ideals of secular-rational politics needs to be foregrounded in order to understand the nature of the Left's cultural vision as well as the modern Malayali nation that it envisaged based on the contract between the men of different castes/communities, negotiated by the rational communist figure. This emerges as the locus point around which we can try to make sense of the operations of the commercial film industry in Malayalam that began thriving by the early 1960s, often by engaging with the energies and affects that the dominant aesthetic of social realism relegated to its margins or delegitimized altogether.

The cinema of the 1950s offers rich avenues to trace the social-cultural vision that the Left envisaged for the modern Malayali nation, the ideological maneuverings it undergoes, as well as the ambiguities and inconsistencies that one can identify within it. The thesis tries to grasp these dynamics as resulting from the Left's strategies of negotiating between the desires and anxieties of the masses – the major support base for the Communist Party in the region – and the emerging middle class in the region during the period. The discussion on the 'artistic' endeavours like *Newspaper Boy* (P Ramdas, 1955) and *Rarichan Enna Powran* (P Bhaskaran, 1956) provides us insights about how Leftist articulations about industrial modernity remained in consonance, at many levels, with the (upper caste) middle class's cultural anxieties about industrialization, even when the Communist government that came to power in Kerala in 1957 clearly endorsed (capitalist) industrial modernization at the policy level. In contrast, the popular comedy film *Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu* (P Bhaskaran, 1958) adopted a much more progressive stance on industrial modernization, as I have tried to argue.

By the late 1950s, one can identify three small, broadly-defined genres emerging: 'women's cinema', 'the Christian / Muslim socials', and the films based on folktales and mythologicals. It signaled the commercial film industry's attempts to engage with and commodify the desires and anxieties of various sections of the population who were disillusioned with the Left's cultural vision and the agendas of social realism. I have tried to link it with the political developments

that were happening in Kerala by the late 1950s, especially the context of *Vimochana Samaram* – the struggle against the Communist government by a coalition of disparate forces led by the Catholic Church. As the analysis of *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (The Prodigal Son: Ramu Kariat, 1961) and *Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi* (New Horizon, New World: MS Mani, 1962) written by Thoppil Bhasi shows, faced with the contestations and dissents emerging with various sections within the polity, the Left provisionally set aside the agendas of class revolution and resorted to the rhetoric of the need to unite as modern Malayalees in order to ensure social progress.

As a concluding note, the thesis proposes that it would be worthwhile to examine the 'middlebrow' films of the 1960s and the 1970s, in which a new set of writers and directors came to occupy prominent positions, as attempts to negotiate with the coordinates of the rationalist integrationist visions of social realism on the one hand, and the tendencies to commodify the affects and energies marginalized in this cultural vision, on the other. I have discussed *Bhargaveenilayam* (The Haunted House: A Vincent, 1964) as an attempt to systematically articulate the dissents of vast sections of the population in the region against the social realism's cultural vision that marginalized the affects and energies of religious faith, romance, sentiments and sensual desires.

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