Chapter III

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

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 bourgeois 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 Biyathamumma should arrange a huge quantity of gold as dowry if the marriage is to take place. Seeing that the alliance is falling off because Biyathamumma 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. 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 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.

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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 E M S 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’.

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

“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).

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
grandeur. 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 vaaneeum 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-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 Biyathamma’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.
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 Karlyachan (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.
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 industrialization7 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.

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 Pidich 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

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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 sequences⁹ (See Figures iii.21 – iii.24).

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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.
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; 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 – 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

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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.