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. 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

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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

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\(^2\) 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 M ajnu (P Bhaskaran, 1962), Ina Pravukal (Kunchacko, 1965) and Ramanan (D M Pottakkadu, 1967) are examples.

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 Sabeida (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

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\(^5\) 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 paattukal7. 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, Christmas 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. P Subrahmaniam produced

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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.\footnote{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).}

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.

\textbf{Figure iv.1:} A poster of Palattu Koman (Kunchacko, 1962) featuring Ragini. \textbf{Figure iv.2:} A screenshot of Sathyan from the same film. \textbf{Source:} Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).
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.\textsuperscript{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).\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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),
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.\textsuperscript{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\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{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 19\textsuperscript{th} and the early 20\textsuperscript{th} Century in Kerala.

\textsuperscript{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\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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” 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

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 chirikkaruth 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: 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 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 Nellakkuyil 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.

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.