Chapter VI
Negotiating the Sacred and the Secular - Malayalam Cinema, 1990s and beyond

Responses of the research participants to the questions based on the Third subsidiary objective of the study, namely, to rethink the ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ and explore possibilities of an ongoing sacred-secular dialogue in Kerala cultural politics, mediated by cinema and art in general, form the core of this chapter. The inquiry in this section flows from the concept of a ‘Third Way’, which seems to evolve in the cultural political scenario of Kerala in the 1970s-90s, in search of a broader redefinition of politics of cinema and a deeper understanding on the positioning of religion in Malayalam Cinema.

In contrast to categorical approaches of the past, a ‘Third Way’ strives to see reality more comprehensive than divisive and multi-layered than binary. Instead of a celebrated centred narrative that ‘answers all questions of life’, the Third way would be a heteroglossia (other/many voices, proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin) of many small, fragmented narratives. The shattering of the socialist utopia and the grand narratives that purported it, has prompted people to look over to other sources and spheres of life in order to answer the ‘big questions’ in life, like ‘what is the meaning in life?’, ‘who am I?’ and ‘where am I going?’-- the questions that challenge the foundations of individual and collective existences and identities. People have started addressing realities beyond the visible. Realities that had been ignored so far and various phenomena in life are now seen as connected rather than disjointed and not as removed from the material realm but as a whole; everything as overlapping rather than compartmental.

The compartmentalization of the spiritual and the material, the sacred and secular, does not correspond to the belief systems in popular cultures and peoples’ lived experiences. The sacred-secular polarization and the separation of these two domains in Kerala cultural politics had been a left legacy from 1930s-40s onwards. Though in
principle the Leftists distanced themselves from religion, religious functionaries and religious minority organizations, the equations in parliamentary politics very soon necessitated a ‘double standard’ in practice, thus turning the separation of the ‘private-public’ domains and promotion of ‘secularism’ into a farce\textsuperscript{57}. It was the radical Left, the Naxalites, who confronted the hypocrisy of the conventional Left in their practice of gain-and-loss parliamentary politics.

Some members of the radical Left, when their movement branched out into different streams by the beginning of the 1980s, ventured into exploring new dimensions in life. A couple of our research participants, who had walked the radical path, attest from their own life that these new, alternative spheres that emerged in the beginning of the 1980s had not interested them before. They used to view all reality through the lens of ‘scientific rationality’ that had guided them earlier. When they joined hands with the alternative projects and movements concerned with environment, health, justice, human rights and so on, their journey took them into new territories, new paths that had been previously ignored or deemed as counter-revolutionary. ` Muraleedharan observes that ‘new age spirituality’ was a dimension that was enthusiastically explored by people across the world, who have been frustrated by modernity and the dehumanizing effects of the industrial age. From 1960s onward we see this trend of searching for a ‘Third Way’ beyond materialism and capitalism. Muraleedharan points to the resonances of that search in Malayalam literature in the 1960s-70s.

By the end of 80s, thanks to Stalinism, a global trend of critiquing the left had emerged….In the 70s many intellectuals across the globe got disillusioned with the left and they moved out. Between the Left and Religion, what is the third option? This question had been raised all over the world….What O.V. Vijayan did in `Gurusagaram’ was to engage with these new trends…..we already had its reflections in Mukundan’s `Haridwaril Manikal Muzhangunu’. Over the world, a movement from the Hippie culture to a different ‘new age’ spirituality had begun by the end of the 1980s (Muraleedharan, context. B-1970s to 90s).

\textsuperscript{57} Some recent discourses connected to ‘Kerala Marxists/CPM and religion’ are already discussed in brief earlier, like the discourses of ‘Mathamillatha Jeevan’, ‘Mathai Chacko’s last rites’ etc (see Chapter.5)
V.T. Padmanabhan writes in the monograph `Atmeeyathayude Nanarthangal’ (Numerous shades of Spirituality), published by the little magazine Patabhedham in the early 1990s:

If spirituality is understood as the inspiration for action derived from a cosmic communion that recognizes the interconnectedness of the whole universe, respecting the knowable and the unknowable aspects of reality, then we can find spirituality in religions, in Marxism and in anything that sprouts out from universal love and propels humans to action (Padmanabhan 1992: 12)

In the light of such new understanding of reality, political activism went through a process of redefinition. Radicalism in politics was thus conceived as embracing newer forms of deep going commitment in different realms of life; a shift from loyalty to a certain ‘centred’ political ideology to interrogating one’s own subjectivity and identity as important as the collective, social subjectivity. Some ex-Naxalites, who thus embarked upon a profound pursuit of truth and meaning in life, baffled their friends and the public as well, by jumping from the radical Left politics to another extreme path, of renunciation of life, the path of `sanyasa’. Some may consider this `180 degree turn’ as `escapist’. Anvar Ali disagrees:

Why some radical intellectuals turn to extreme ritualistic religion or asceticism? There is an element of surrender in this, which we can’t completely define or explain. But if we think everyone taking this ‘about turn’ is choosing the path of surrender, that will be foolishness. In our times, in fact it has become extremely difficult to embrace sanyasa and become truly spiritual (Anvar Ali, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Earlier, a politically radical person was seen as radically against religion, since all forms of religiosity were perceived as ‘regressive’. Now very few people consider ‘progressive’ or radical subjectivity as diametrically opposite to religious subjectivity. A more profound understanding of reality would look at different layers of subjectivity and identity in a person not as compartmental but as overlapping and complementary. Advocate George Pulikuthyil, calls attention to the radicals within organized religions, who confront the power structures in religions and work as corrective force from within. He refers to the `Sufis’ in Islam, `Bhakti poets’ in Hinduism and `Old Testament prophets’ in Judaism and Christianity as examples.
A strong similarity that we observe among the politically radical and religiously radical people is that they both confront power structures not for capturing power, since their mission consists in denouncing and if needed destabilizing power centres. They are not interested in the appropriation of power or material wealth that usually accompanies power in institutional religions. The common element of renunciation among the two groups, politically radical and religiously radical, prompts them to view the physical and metaphysical realms of life as a continuum (George Pulikuthyil, context B).

For a secular, ‘progressive’ person, to be open to the sacred/spiritual dimension, may not mean conventional modes of spiritual pursuit bound by any sacred texts, rules and rituals, but would imply the full realization of ‘personal is political’ and ‘social is political’. Lata Mani describes her journey to the ‘SacredSecular’ as encompassing all aspects of social life and not as a ‘flight from the world’.

It was clear to me from the start that cultivating a spiritual practice did not imply retreating from the social world. On the contrary, my journey was leading me to discover an even greater interconnectedness between phenomena than I had previously believed to be true (Mani 2009:3).

A comprehensive, overlapping perspective of the sacred-secular, works against all divisive and exclusive tendencies. It is multi-dimensional, multi-layered and beyond the divisive borders and boundaries of any realms of life. A non-divisive approach to the sacred-secular celebrates the experiences of the feminine and the masculine, of the mainstream and the marginalised, of humans and all other living beings, as integral elements linked in a cosmic communion. But as division, conflict and disintegration are historically inherited, the binaries of material-spiritual, sacred-secular, and private-public are still maintained in life, in art and in other realms, by political and religious power structures, through the conventions and orthodoxies they perpetuate. Understanding how these binaries, in our case the sacred-secular, are conceived and perceived by various stake holders by listening to their accounts and how such concepts and perceptions are represented in art, especially in cinema is the main thrust of the inquiry in this chapter.

6.1 The Sacred-Secular divide in Life and Art

Promotion of rigid, dogmatic positions on religion on the part of its advocates, and the standard perceptions of and reactions to religion on the part of some ‘secular’
intellectuals are usually in high contrast to the living reality of religion and spirituality among ordinary people. Reactionary stands on religion, faiths and spiritualities have slotted all diverse experiences of transcendence under one blanket category, the ‘sacred’. And institutions, primarily the State, and individuals that distance themselves from religions, faiths and spiritualities are considered ‘secular’. A more comprehensive understanding that unravels the interconnectedness of transcendence and immanence, will convince us of the folly of positioning ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ as binary opposites and will enable us to distinguish faith from the ‘politics’ (ideology) of religion and spirituality from the pious, ritualistic practices.

In the post modern age, in increasing number of individuals, especially creative artists, have rejected the binary approaches, realizing that there could be alternative ways to address the sacred and the secular. Instead of shadow-boxing with religious revivalism and fundamentalism, filmmakers and audiences could explore the place of religion/spirituality in their own lives and among various populations. In India we still cherish the beauty of religious and ethnic pluralism in contrast to the ‘mono cultures’ that exist in many European countries. Significant challenges of diversity and hybridity are emerging in Western societies only recently as a by-product of new waves of immigration.

This chapter examines whether the conventional ‘sacred-secular’ divide effectively continues in the Kerala cultural politics and/or these dimensions are being negotiated in various ways and if so what bearings such negotiations would have on the process of redefinition of the ‘politics’ (in plural) of Malayalam cinema in the ‘1990s and beyond’ period. What impact such negotiations would have on the filmmakers, viewers, practitioners of party politics and practitioners of institutional/non-institutional faiths and spiritualities in articulating their ‘philosophy of life’? There is a need to redefine politics of cinema from various perspectives, including even insights from religion and spirituality, which could be described as the ‘Beyond’/’Depth’ dimension.

Cinema and Religion/Spirituality with their rich and unique symbolic registers could enter into creative dialogue and the outcome could definitely enrich the cultural
politics of Kerala in the present postmodern age, where life has become ‘polycentric’,
inspiration and energy being drawn from multiple and varied sources. We find more
people now paying attention to Andrei Tarkovski, Krystof Kieszlowski and whose
works and vision attract more people. Masters of Soviet Cinema like Sergei Eisenstein
and the architects of the Third World militant cinema are less frequently discussed,
while new directors from Iran, Korea and also from Europe are sought after for
‘something different’ they have to tell about life.

In Malayalam cinema, we find a renewed interest in the films of G. Aravindan even
among people who may be critical of the cinematic form or treatment he adopted. In
popular/main stream cinema too, a more positive and balanced attitude towards the
profundness of life is surfacing in the 2000s. Nandanam and Pranchiyettan and the
Saint are two examples, where a `down to earth’ morality/spirituality is presented and
well received by the audiences. Interestingly both films are by director Ranjith, who
had been criticised in the 1990s for his `religious/cultural revivalist’ blockbusters with
superstar in `anti-hero’ roles. An increasing number of filmmakers and viewers are
likely to turn their attention to this `pursuit of profoundness and simplicity’. Such
pursuit in art and cinema may suggest creative answers to the `big questions’ in life,
which used to pertain to the realm of the `sacred’, and never to be mixed with the
`secular’ world of cinema. Earlier, instances of the `secular’ cinema paying respect to
the `sacred’ was in the filed of `mythological films’, which have now become a rarity
in Malayalam filmdom, but an `omnipresence’ on television.

6.1.1 Understanding the Sacred

The understanding of `sacred’ and `secular’ in many circles still continues to be in
dualistic and binary oppositional categories. ‘Sacred’, which can be synonymous with
’spiritual’ and broadly with `ethical’ and `moral’, is the realm where from many
people believe to draw meaning and destination for their lives. Lata Mani describes
the sacred as the sentient aspect (= capable of feeling and perception and capable of
responding emotionally rather than intellectually) in contrast to the non-sentient
aspects or dimensions (Mani 2009). In contrast to the spatially and temporarily defined
secular realm, traditionally the sacred realm was considered as linked `eternity’ where
the ‘spiritual beings’, i.e. gods, goddesses, saints and all heavenly beings supposedly dwell, and where from they ‘control’ or intervene in our mundane, material lives.

The idea of two domains (Madan 1997), earthly and heavenly, appears and is endorsed in many religious texts of the Judeo-Christian religions. We find a celebrated formation of the sacred-secular dichotomy in Augustine (‘City Of God’): ‘two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of the self’. The doctrine of the separation of the ‘spiritual’ and ‘material’ and the supremacy of the spiritual that gained currency in the Catholic circles and in the West in general, was eventually challenged by different movements. In the 17th century, a move to push the ‘sacred’ to the private realm came from two sources: the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Reformation opened the way for secularization and legitimization of the rights of both the political community and the individualised citizen. This process of differentiation of the private (sacred) and the public (secular) was reinforced by the rise of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, which criticised religion as a system centred on a ‘theocratic’ worldview. Human beings were called upon to ‘dare to know’ whatever there is to be known through scientific observation and the exercise of reason. The new epistemology distanced itself totally from the sacred and the knowledge of and through the sacred.

In contrast to this Western context, the Indian and other non-Western societies rarely consider sacred and secular as two separate domains. The general tendency in the East is to treat sacred and secular and public and private rather as ‘mirror images’ of each other, clarifies T.N. Madan. He borrows the concept of akam (the interior) and puram (the exterior) from the early classical Tamil poetry (ca.100BC-AD250), to denote the personal/private and the public/social dimensions of human existence, which for Indians, are not separate dimensions demarcated by boundaries, but are continuities (Madan 2006).

This study seeks to explore how people in Kerala, in general conceive and personalize their approach to the ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’. Do many people take recourse to the Western separation between the sacred and the secular and so maintain a distanced
stance? Or are there many people who easily manage the `passage’ between `akam’ and `puram’, namely, are they comfortable with negotiating the `spiritual’ and `material’ in ways different from the `scientific rational’ approach originated in the West? In the following, we summarize the views and experiences of the research participants ranging from the 1970s’ period to the young generation of the 1990s and beyond.

George master, a retired science teacher, recollected the atheistic attitudes in his youth before clarifying his present standpoint regarding religion, beliefs and the `beyond’.

I do believe that there is an invisible power. I don’t believe that there is a Christian/Hindu/Muslim god or goddess. This invisible force is beyond human control. Maybe you can call it prakriti (Nature-spirit) in one word. I believe in such a power. Also I have observed many incidents in my life and in someone else’s life, incidents that escape logical explanations. I believe in such a force also on the basis of writings of people whose writing is credible (George master, context.A-1970s).

In the same vein many creative people, poets, painters and filmmakers, have developed interest in the divine and in its various manifestations, but mostly from a non-denominational stand point. Anwar Ali, the young poet, prefers this typical stance:

It’s a beautiful concept that each manifestation is divine, is a god/goddess. I like the Saiva temples very much; this is all part of my spirituality. I like goddess Saraswathy of Mookambika…I have a passion for idols connected to creative writing. At the same time I have great respect for the monotheistic beliefs in Islam (God the omnipotent) and also to the `great void’ in Buddhism. In Christianity the One God has manifestations, but not in Islam. Looking from all these multiple angles, the new generation has all the scope to think about a power or powers beyond our visible universe. I got this privilege/blessing only after 30-35 years old, where as the very young generation kids might approach reality like this, incorporating spiritualities too, even when they are only ten years old (Anvar Ali, context.B-1970s to 90s).

There are others, who move around mostly in `secular’ circles, but keep their `personal spirituality’ alive, like Sara Joseph, the writer and activist. She does not find a problem in believing in a personal god of a particular religion. But she refuse her personal god-experience to be mediated by an institutional religious structure.
I don’t need an institution (religion) for my dialogue with God….This in-depth awareness/experience rose out of my constant address to God, “O God, how should I live my life?” The Church, or any other religious institution is essentially connected to power. In Rome the church and the State were just one power. As per the teaching of Jesus we don’t need any of these structures (Sara Joseph, context.A-1970s).

Louis Mathew, a film activist, holds views that come very close to that of Sara Joseph, but he defines the experience of the ‘sacred’ and his relation to the sacred more on a horizontal/human plane, where love, goodness and ethical correctness are synonymous with the divine:

I stopped going to church, sacraments etc. But I believe in God, who is the totality of ‘good/right’. I consider Christ, Gandhi all in the same range of great people. I never deny God, nor do I get into any argument on if God is there or not. For me God is the one who leads humans to the right thing. I had believed literally that ‘God is love/Love is God’. There is no change in my position regarding God or religion; as far as I stand for the right things I’m ’religious’; I don’t have to go to church and take sacraments in order to be religious (Louis Mathew, context.B-1970s to 90s).

There are others, whose God-experience is derived through conventional forms of religious imagination and affiliation, and interestingly such individuals do not find conventional faith and even rituals as something that conflict with their ‘secular’, artistic careers. The sacred-secular differentiation does not seem to matter much to them. Basheer Mechary (writer), Krupa (popular film actor) and Devarajan (Film-Theatre director) share similar views:

In my student days, when I was active in the SFI\(^{58}\), I didn’t think about religion much. I hadn’t studied about religion. Even when I was working in the gulf I didn’t study about religion. Now after coming back I have started to study religion…. Though earlier I had read books of *yuktivadam* (the ‘Rationalists’ school), I hadn’t opted for the ‘God is dead’ stand. I do believe that there is God. I felt like rejecting the religion practiced in my family. My grandmother’ positive stands on religion had influence on me. But my grandfather was a peculiar person. He would do all *niskaram* etc. But in the night I used to hear him panicking if he catches a simple fever or cold. When I walk into my house I used to enjoy the spilling over of prayer from my house (Basheer Mechary, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Krupa, started her career as dancer and actor when she was very small, she is now a post-graduate student in English literature at Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, a

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\(^{58}\) SFI is the abbreviation of Student Federation of India, the students wing of the CPM-Marxist party
college known across Kerala for its `open, secular’ campus and community. But she does not have any qualms about openly asserting her faith in conventional forms of piety and rituals:

I believe in the power of prayer. You can call me `pious’ that way. If the other person of another faith realises that how important my faith is to me, and I understand how important their faith is for them, we can avoid tensions/frictions in the name of religion. Art can play an important role in doing this. I have observed many dancers and musicians beginning and concluding their recitals, always wishing for universal harmony. There are many artists like that, and I place myself among those artists. I believe the ultimate aim of everything, art or cinema or politics should be `loka samastha sukhino bavanthu’ (the well being of the whole world).’(Krupa, context.C-1990s and beyond)

Devarajan also considers his relation to the sacred as a bonding with the whole world or humanity and its wellbeing.

When you put Marxism into practice, we come to realise that “man doesn’t live by bread alone”. There are things beyond the bread. That Beyond comes from the realisation that there is a power/spirit beyond all these and by knowing that spirit humans become a son/daughter of God. Each human birth/destiny is a journey to become a son/daughter of God and that’s what I always have worked for…. Also our concern should not be about me, but about the world, `vasudeiva kudumbakam’ (world as my family). This world is my tharavadu (ancestral home) (Devarajan, context.B-1970s to 90s).

In the post-Marxist context ushered in by the beginning of the 1990s, more people have begun to acknowledge their relationship with the `sacred’ power or spirit beyond; whether they arrive at the idea or experience of the divine through conventional or non-conventional ways is a different question. There are people who cross over the boundaries of organized religions in an attempt to dialogue with the members of other religions or in search of an `eclectic’ or `religionless’ spirituality. For many such persons, the explanation of the divine apparently consists in its `non-explicability’, in contrast to the analytical, scientific certitudes that the `secular’ world is more familiar with. Hans Ucko writes in `Socially Engaged Religions’, about the coming together of people who have experienced the divine through different ways from different sources:

They have come to understand that God truly has many mansions. They have come to appreciate that one cannot exhaust God, that God is always Deus
sempre maior; one cannot grasp God, understand God, hold God. “God is unknowable and incomprehensible. The only thing knowable and comprehensible about God is his unknowability and his incomprehensibility”, said St. John of Damscus (Ucko 2010: 18).

6.1.2 'Secular' and 'Secularism' in India
In India and in many other non-Western societies, the ‘sacred’ is often understood and experienced as merged with the ‘secular’ and not as conceptually or physically separate. Madan illustrates this point, taking the example of how a kolam/rangoli (a graphic floral-cum-geometric floor design using white/coloured powder), an auspicious sign of domestic well-being in South/North India, transforms the secular space of the courtyard of a house into ‘sacred’. Not every home would have its own courtyard, but they make a kolam/rangoli in front of the house, even in quasi-public lane of a narrow street and people who pass by respect the kolam/rangoli without trampling over it (Madan 2006).

Though the conception and treatment of the sacred-secular in Indian popular culture are in such fluid and non-divisive ways, the State and its organs and certain sections in the civil society feel it imperative to maintain the sacred-secular separation for practical and ideological purposes. Both ‘secular’ and ‘secularism’ have generated heated debates in India and many have raised doubts about the relevance and efficacy of a State-sponsored secularism in our country with its age old multi-religious and multi-ethnic culture, in contrast to the European cultural scenario, where secularism was born in a specific historical context.

Rustom Bharucha identifies two versions of secularism outlined in the Indian Constitution; dharmanirapeksata, that is impartiality to religion and sarva dharma samabhava that is equal respect to all religion (Bharucha 1998). He argues that the latter contradicts the former, dharmanirapeksata, which upholds the separation of religion and State. He takes his argument forward that the Western concept of secularism cannot be translated or transferred to Indian context. Ashis Nandi identifies equal respect to all religion as the proper non-Western understanding and experience of secularism. The other sense of secularism, in which we speak of ‘secularizing the state’, has been used in the West for the past 300 years; this model
demarcates ‘public’ and ‘private’ territories and confines the practice of religion to the private. Supporting the non-Western idea of secularism, Nandi says while public life may or may not be kept free of religion, it must have space for a continuous dialogue among religious traditions and between the religious and the secular (Nandi 2002).

The disparity between the ideal of secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution, its implementation by the State from case to case, and its perception and practice in different contexts by intellectuals, activists and common man on the street become evident in the different responses that the participants gave to the research questions in this regard. Professor I. Shanmugadas adheres more to the ‘commonality’ factor as the core of secularism. There are others, who hold that secularism in India accommodates difference and co-existence of religions in the public sphere unlike the West.

What is secular? It becomes immaterial to me if you are a Hindu or a Christian or a Muslim…your caste and religion becomes immaterial to me and the fact that you’re part of the human race becomes important to me. There are lots of difference between you and the other, but there are lots of things in common. I feel more commonality among humans than differences. Everyone is the same or even equal when it comes to the basic necessities, physical as well as spiritual hunger and thirst. As we are all one in our commonality in the hunger for food, we are one in our hunger and thirst for something more than food and drink (I. Shanmugadas, context.A-1970s).

Sunny Joseph, cinematographer, does not care for the idea of secularism, but practically he too prefers not to have any divisions among people on the basis of religion:

What does ‘secular’ mean? No religion? Equal distance to all religions? Secular is a political concept, more of a concern of the government in the political sphere. ‘Secular’ doesn’t concern me in my personal life. My ‘religion’ is only ‘being a living being’, I have no other religion than this. I don’t view humans in the eyes of religion; so secularism doesn’t matter to me. In that sense I’m against the conventional religions. I don’t want any religion to come between me and another human being. So I’m not concerned if am secular or not (Sunny Joseph, context.A-1970s).

P.T. Kunjumuhammed, filmmaker and ex-MLA (CPI-Marxist) does not view secularism as levelling differences, but as drawing strength from the diverse religious sources and traditions:
In India, our secularism incorporates different religious faiths or traditions or practices and it is not in spite of religion. Gandhi, Abdul Rehman and others stood for a secularism based on religious harmony. You can’t do away with religious beliefs, a ‘believer’ will keep seeking… a non-believer also will keep seeking (P.T. Kunjumuhammed, context.A-1970s).

Civic Chandran, an ex-Naxalite, writer and activist comes up with similar observations:

The greatest secularists in India were great religious personalities. Maulana Azad, Abdul Rehman, Gandhi…the greatest religious people were the greatest secularists in India (Civic Chandran, context.A-1970s).

V.G. Thampy, renowned poet, shares his experience of bringing together people of different faiths in a concerted effort to combat communalism:

One important insight that came up in our efforts was this: communalism was on the increase those days (late 80s and after Babri Masjid demolition) and we found that secularism was not the means to combat communalism, but the richness of faith/s. We needed to strengthen the faith/spiritualities in each/every religion….times of negation of one’s religion is gone. Now, one has to boldly say what he or she is and it is up to others to ‘classify or categorize’ him or her and it is the problem of their yellow glass (V.G. Thampy, context.A-1970s).

George Pulikuthyil, an advocate and the director of ‘Jananeethi’ Peoples’ Initiatives for Human Rights, is in favour of overlapping the sacred and the secular spheres and their coming together in the public sphere. But he has apprehensions about the present state of religious and political leadership that usually stops earnest efforts for collaboration half way through:

I am against the Western separation of the sacred and secular. But how far is joining of hands of sacred and secular possible and practical? If all were transparent and straight, coming together would have been easy. It comes from the provision of ‘agreeing to disagree’ in mutual respect and appreciation. Most of the religio-political leaders, middle class politicians, intellectuals and cultural leaders live with double standards and make any meaningful collaboration or cooperation of the sacred-secular next impossible (George Pulikuthyil, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Sara Joseph revokes another impetus to be found in the religious and prophetic traditions, ‘a return to the sources’, like the ‘Bhakti’ and Sufi traditions in the Indian
context, where non-institutional, alternative spiritualities become the fountain head of secularism and creative outpouring of the human spirit in art and life:

We don’t hear such voices in today’s secularism, in which the attempt is only to avoid clashes between religions. Secularism stays at a very plain level and it doesn’t develop to any other levels. I visualise a St. Francis coming out ‘in public’ like a popular Sufi saint/singer. We are not waiting for such ‘phenomenon’ once in a century, but a transformation of any individual who wishes so into such intimate and profound experience of ecstasy. I am concerned that a fundamentalist is coming up from the Muslim community, but I am more hopeful of a Sufi rising out of that community (Sara Joseph, context.A-1970s).

These observations are very much in line with what Rajeswari Rajan and Anuradha Needham describe as the ‘Indian way’ of life that is generally regarded as pervasively and deeply religious and forms the basis for our long standing tradition of tolerance and co-existence. Although secularism in India is predominantly expressed in terms of state doctrine, the mosaic of our traditions of tolerance, rationalism, secular humanism and attitudes sceptical and ironic about religion, forms the popular base for what we might call an ‘indigenous secularism’. It is fairly common to refer to Buddhism, Kabir, Akbar’s *Bin Illahi*, Dara Sikoh, Ram Mohan Roy and Brahmo Samaj (reformist Hinduism), Ambedkar and Periyar in this context: a medley of names and influences that are broadly ‘secular’ in spirit. Originally Hinduism has been marked by eclecticism, heterogeneity, decentralization, assimilation and syncreticism—in marked contrast to the present-day Westernised and nationalist Hinduism. What is usually left out is forging connections between the indigenous secularism, which is part of the intellectual and artistic traditions of India and its ways of life, and the official, state-sponsored secularism as political ideology (Rajan & Needham 2007).

### 6.1.3 SacredSecular

This compound word, ‘SacredSecular’, proposed by Lata Mani (2009) becomes very relevant in the ambit of Indian philosophical and popular cultural traditions that tend to view life as synthetic instead of analytic, complex/hybrid than concrete/bounded. Mani states that from a spiritual standpoint every particle in the phenomenal world is of inherent value and is as sacred as every other. These two aspects—the inherent
worth and the equality of all aspects of the material world-- are the basis on which we perceive an underlying unity of the seemingly diverse universe:

Unity and diversity. Fragility and the capacity to endure. Extraordinary fecundity. Everything equally endowed with awareness. Any explanatory system that departs from these premises in seeking to make sense of the natural or social world runs the risk of flattening the intricate complexity of the principles that undergird the universe and its functioning (Mani 2009: 117).

The Western scientific, rational tradition that is at the base of viewing ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ as bounded entities, is also responsible for elevating humans over Nature, according an exalted place to human consciousness. Attempts like SacredSecular to do away with conceiving reality as binary opposites, also complement the broader understanding of ‘common good’ as extended to include the non-human parts of the phenomenal world. As we become more aware of the interdependence of all aspects of the phenomenal world, we would not have a problem in according consciousness to all things. We quote from a poem by the Marathi poet Arun Kolatkar in his collection Jejuri (about a temple town in Maharashtra), which in very simple but profound way brings home the idea of SacredSecular as a continuum, as a play of unity and diversity.

What is god
and what is stone
the dividing line
if it exists
is very thin
at jejuri
and every other stone
is god or his cousin

there is no crop
other than god
and god is harvested here
around the year
and round the clock
out of the bad earth
and the hard rock

....
(from Jejuri by Arun Kolatkar, cited in Rajan and Needham, 2007: 40)

Religion, approaching the infinity through its own framework from a sacred/spiritual standpoint, attempts to address existential questions and explain everyday practices.
Secular philosophies posit their own frameworks, each with their premises, in order to make sense of some of the very phenomena for which religion claims to offer answers. But the vast and ‘untameable’ character of infinity means that neither religious nor secular philosophies can offer us a total or exhaustive interpretation. But some religious and secular ideologies do imagine/present themselves as capable of offering exhaustive/conclusive answers and there are others who prefer the middle path.

Lata Mani (2009) identifies three positions that take different stands on the distinction/continuity between the sacred and secular dimensions in the Indian context. First there are the secularists who argue for separation and so for keeping religion out of the political arena in view of ensuring democracy. Then there are religious nationalist ideologies like the Hindutva that insists on the centrality of religious identity as they define it. Religion as per Hindutva, distinguishes one set of citizen adherents from another, and anyone not of the majority Hindu religion is deemed to be ‘other’, lesser and less deserving for the claim of ‘national’ (read religious) identity. The third perspective takes issue with the secularist position, for they argue that separation of religious and the secular runs counter to the organic nature of Indian society. They oppose the religious nationalist positions but argue that the socio-cultural realities of South Asia demand a more comprehensive approach to the sacred and secular than the ‘one dimensional’ stand of the secularists (Mani 2009).

The stand that some of the research participants take regarding sacred-secular comes close to the third position above, which is more realistic and comprehensive in the Indian context.

The leftist/Marxists used to ask a fundamental question, “Are you a spiritualist or a materialist?” We closed these binary options/ imposed choices. There was a quality judgement that ‘to be an atheist was sublime’ and ‘to be a believer’ was something bad/inferior; we questioned it and presented an open attitude in Patabhedam. Also there was this block between two sections, we tried to overcome it. We lived with the fact that one is a believer, goes to church/temple, reads scriptures…the other is an atheist. Is this a problem for both to dialogue? It shouldn’t be.’ (Civic Chandran, context.A-1970s)

59 Patabhedam, the little magazine, launched in the mid 1980s later became a hub of many alternative movements, initiatives and discussions. Search for a ‘secular spirituality’ was one such pursuit that Patabhedam undertook
It used to be fashionable among revolutionaries to be an atheists and reject religion/faith in public. ‘Progressive’, ‘revolutionary’, ‘leftist-secular’ were all part of a package. To be a party member was to be cut off from faith/religion. Politics and religion were slotted under totally ‘exclusive’ categories. Now in Kerala there are leftists who deal with faith at different levels: those who are totally against all considerations of faith and those who can combine faith and ideology. The number of people, who combine and are comfortable with being ‘in two worlds’ are on the increase.’ (George master, context.A-1970s)

Janaki shares the ‘dilemma’ of leftists as well as feminists who are faced with conventional dichotomies and almost ‘imposed’ choices arising out of popular perceptions, for example the choice of religion or no-religion:

Today’s communist shares multiple identities and spaces…he or she could be a communist and a believer at the same time. But, because of the leftist-atheist hangover, it is very difficult for a Malayalee who is a leftist, to acknowledge multiple spaces, including that of religion. This problem exists more among women activists. A feminist has more ‘responsibility’ to prove that she is not into conventional, patriarchal religion and practices…. If me, a feminist, go to a temple for devotions, I’m betraying my ‘pure’ feminist stature, I’m ‘bowing’ to patriarchy? How can you arbitrarily do ‘neat’ categorization of some institutions in the society as patriarchal and some others as not? I would say the education system, the syllabus, our cinema and other arts all these are male-centred (Janaki, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Thampy finds lots of scope for a give and take between the sacred and secular spaces:

Sacred-Secular is an important combination or dialogue space. There is a lot from the Sacred to be given to the Secular and vice versa. We had asked Bishop Paulose Mar Paulose, “When you speak from another platform, say that of Marxist-secularist, what do you give to that platform from your own? Is there a language of ‘moral alertness’ that you can give from your sphere?” (V.G.Thampy, context.A-1970s)

Some interesting observations that Sara Joseph presents about the overlapping of the sacred and secular, pleasure and piety support the ‘Indian way’ that we saw in Rajan and Needham earlier. This aptly summarises the section on the compound nature of SacredSecular.

For us Indians no matter to what religion we may belong, first we are ‘Indians’ in our worldview and attitudes. My being Christian comes on top of my being Indian. For Indians any sin or guilt or sorrow can disappear if you take a dip in Ganges. Whereas for the Westerners, everything is complex, sin, guilt, sex, all part of an ancient morality (however renewed/modified). So their tendency will be to overthrow/ reject their worldview. For us Indians, we can
take life and almost everything as ‘lila’/‘maya’….here we celebrate sex, nudity et al (take our temples). Bodily pleasures are also part of the ‘lila’ and bhakti, so there isn’t much conflict and guilt. Our art is in fact translating our lila or enjoyment or pleasure into another level of experience (Sara Joseph, context.A-1970s).

6.2 ‘Meeting Rivers’: Emerging Sacred-Secular Interfaces

While in the socio-cultural spheres, people in India have been comfortably living with blurred boundaries of sacred and secular, private and public and so on, on the political front we had to address ideologies and influences from the West. For example, the European modernity and its secularist ideology conflicted with our world view and the ‘Indian way’ of life. Though it is not easy or possible to shake off the impact of the prolonged colonial rule and its hangover on our socio-cultural and political imagination, people, notably some artists, are proposing a ‘return to our primal world of symbols and faith’ as a balancing act. Jyoti Sahi, an artist based in Bangalore, who integrates the religious symbols and imageries into his work, urges all creative minds to rediscover the liberating power of the primal world of faith, which is beyond and older than all forms of denominational religions and sects and the divisions that exist among them.

In a world where institutional religions have tended to construct walls rather than bridges, I believe that the images and symbols of the Primal World of Faith, remind us of what is the common ground lying beneath all the doctrines that religious systems have built. Perhaps these symbols are not to be understood logically, as they do not follow a discursive, prepositional way of thought. They are closer to Being in that they are pointers to a way of seeing, rather than possessing the Truth. This world of Faith is essentially evocative and suggestive. It is the world of Beauty in the way that Rabindranath Tagore understood Beauty as an embodiment of Joy, Ananda. (Sahi 2010: 38)

Sahi points to the power of images and symbols to help us rediscover the poetic roots of spiritual expression, which we find in the Psalms in the Bible, in the Vedas, in the Bhakti poems and other similar sources. Such spiritual poems express people’s faith in a creator God and also their longing for a protector God, who many times may appear to be absent in the darkest moments of life; longing then become ‘Lamentations’. Sahi underscores lament as an essential aspect of the poetic world view, where an artist
would try to put together what has fallen apart or dismembered; the very word symbol comes from the Greek ‘sum-ballein’, meaning to piece together, join what is broken.

There are many thinkers, like Sebastian Kapen, who lament the shattering of the symbolic world with the advent of science and money. Science turned everything into mere ends and means, cause and effect; capitalism turned everything into a commodity/exchange value. Kapen confronts the set of myths generated and promoted by capitalism as well as the socialist utopia in the past. Capitalism spawns up many shallow, alienated and alienating symbols, making men and women appear what they are not in reality. On the other hand, the centrist Marxist –Socialist ideology and praxis slotted myth, magic and religion under the ‘superstructure’ and maintained a divide between matter and spirit and in effect refused to acknowledge the holistic dimension of human existence. With the growth of science and technology and with the emergence of man as the subject of history, the magical-mythical symbolism of old had nowhere to draw nourishment from. Not to symbolize is to cease to be human.

In art and different spiritualities, we see the angst and yearning of human beings to draw energy from more ‘primordial’ sources of intuition and imagination than from the analytical worlds of logic, science and economics (Kapen 1994).

Lata Mani expresses great respect to the ancient religious tradition of India that does not draw a line to demarcate the sacred and the secular worlds and experiences, but she cautions against any positions that simply defend religion as a supposedly timeless and inviolable inheritance or as an irrefutable social reality:

Religion is a social institution and as such is characterised by all of the conflicts that have marked the history of our society. Much of what passes for religion itself violates the principles of unity, diversity and the radical equality and inherent worth of all aspects of infinity. There is no question of taking shelter in something unproblematic called ‘religion’; likewise the notion of sanathana dharma or ‘immemorial tradition, for this stream is not discontinuous from the institutionalised religion. The same reasons make it impossible to hold up particular texts as infallible repositories of truth (Mani 2009: 14)

If artists and thinkers like Jyoti Sahi, Kapen and others are advocating a return to the primordial faiths and symbols to draw inspiration, what we find more today even among educated young professionals in Kerala is a return to ritualistic religions and
sacred texts, not often to draw inspiration from them, but to ‘take shelter’ in their protective spell. An increasing number of individuals and communities are embracing the conventional route of religion, rituals and devotions and everything that goes along with it. To make life easily ‘manageable’, many such individuals and groups keep religion to their ‘private quarters’ without much implications to their ‘public’ professional life. Certain denominations and sects even advise their members to safeguard their ‘spiritual’ life from the negative influences of the ‘secular’ world. It may appear like history is walking backwards.

There are still a good number of staunch communists or conventional atheists in Kerala society, who at cross-roads in the post 1990s are finding it difficult to negotiate with the changing ideologies, worldviews and life styles. On the other hand, there is another group of people, perhaps an ‘insignificant minority’, who try to strike a balance between the sacred and secular dimensions, between art and faith. In their attempt to eliminate the distance between two human beings and between human beings and other living beings in the cosmos, their life and praxis consciously or unconsciously ignore and blur the boundaries of ideologies and rigid notions of ‘political correctness’. In the standpoints of some of our research participants summarised here, one may hear more of a yearning for what could be called a ‘secular-spirituality’, which has varied forms and expressions. Its beauty consists in its plurality and its refusal to adhere to the boundaries of institutional religions and the scruples of conventional morality.

Sunny Joseph shares the experience of his faith in the non-divisibility of the material-spiritual being reaffirmed at his meeting with Guru Nityachaitanya Yati:

Once I went to the ashram of Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati. Guru told me that he was writing about four personalities, whom the world might call ‘real rascals’. He was writing about them in order to show that how these persons are ‘beloved sons and daughters of God’. They are: Van Gogue (anarchist), Dostoyevsky (gambler, ‘immoral’), Isadora Duncan (‘am like a slave in bed’), and then Ikiu (a Buddhist monk, who said ‘all Buddha born in the world were born through a vagina, where many have got stuck too’). Ikiu also said that the root cause for all evil/illness of the world is accumulated wealth in the hands of a few. He said this some 600 years before Marx. So who is the real Marx? Ikiu has summarized the two volumes of Das Capital in four sentences. So for me
there is no conflict between *atmeeyam* (spiritual) and *bhauthikam* (material) (Sunny Joseph, context.A-1970s).

I. Shanmugadas, writer and film critic, often examines the question of `cinema and spirituality’ in his writings and discussions. He explains the meeting of material-spiritual in terms of internal-external priorities specific to respective fields:

The `socio-political thinking puts its thrust on the external reality, on social justice. From a spiritual or religious angle we ask the same questions in a different way, not perhaps the justice or social-structural question, but we ask questions on the ‘inner spirit, source and inner current’ of all phenomena. Who controls all these? Believers are taken to God through these questions or they begin with/in God. Though I am not a believer, I believe that believers’ questions on God, or their God-centred questions are valid and important (I.Shanmugadas, context.A-1970s).

The response of KGS, the poet and activist, serves as a profound explanation or definition of what is `secular spirituality’ and so it fits well here to sum up this section:

A true spirituality, if it is to be a spirituality, it should be without boundaries; it can’t be part of an established religion, it is more a `secular spirituality’, a cultural experience….it can sprout out from Christianity, it can come from the communist party, it can come from any human movement/experience. I consider it as the cream of human experience, the foundational energy. Nobody can block its flow…no ‘dam’ can check its flow forever. It can never be curtailed or shelved or destroyed, because it flows through all rivers. We can’t build dams in all rivers. It flows through all minds. This is the force which has maximum potential, it is the force that gives us faith in the humans and makes us not cynical, makes us capable of the maximum level of resistance (K.G.Sankara Pillai, context.A-1970s).

**6.2.1 Secular-Spiritual, the politics of the Present**

Spirituality is not any more considered as `saving one’s own soul’ in isolation but seen as harmony with everyone. Spirituality is not concerned about `heaven up there’ but with the cosmos around us and within us, here and now. Spirituality that is becoming the concern of a broad range of people in the society today is the one that is freely flowing from different sources and not restricted to the institutionalised concepts and definitions of `sacred’; these new forms of spirituality never imagines an `escape’ from the secular, but is rooted in the secular drawing energy from and giving energy to the secular. Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, who is a prominent representative of secular-leftist stand in Kerala society and in India at large, admits that the spiritual extends
beyond the material and beyond the usual modes of comprehension. Our inability to define what spirituality is arises from the limitations of our language, because language evolved in material, physical contexts of clarity and coherence and so it cannot easily and fully translate metaphysical truths. If we read into the spirit of the letter, it becomes clear that the crust of all religions is unity and interconnectedness of all living beings. Identifying this unifying principle underlying all religious doctrines help us to confront any essentialist, dogmatic stand of religion that restricts human thinking and development. Thus in the sacred and the secular we recognize the same unifying principle. Thus we could say that the essence of the spiritual is secular and the essence of the secular is spiritual (Iyer, 1992).

When asked to connect the language of spirituality and creativity, Civic Chandran commented that though spirituality can be addressed through creativity, it comes to us easily when we are alone and searching truths beyond us. In the same monograph, `Atmeeyathayude Nanarthangal’, late Dominic George, a Jesuit priest and Liberation theologian, discusses the language of secular spirituality: ‘Secular spirituality is this worldly. Questions regarding life after death do not concern those who pursue secular spirituality. Secular spirituality’s answer to the questions on life after death would be “we don’t know” (George 1992: 17).

Sunny Joseph, cinematographer, who has worked with G.Aravindan and others and is well acclaimed for his work in Piravi60, is very clear about the language of a secular spirituality, which he says is a language of NOW.

Spirituality for me is the bonding between the humans and the Nature; the total bonding of humans to humans to the Nature. That interconnectedness is spirituality for me; it is nothing metaphysical, but is of now and living; nothing more. As Buddhism holds, the reality of life consists in ‘today’, in the ‘present’ moment….. Sree Narayana Guru has said, quoting from Upanishad: “nava navam innale innu matte divasam ingane chintha cheythukoodathe brahman oru bedavumillennu arinjidenam” (without thinking of yesterday, today, and another new day we should know the Supreme Brahma as the One without distinctions). Upanishad says that the most dangerous disease of the mind is to see reality/time as past, present and

60 Piravi, was the directorial debut of Shaji N.Karun and Sunny Joseph cranked the camera for it. The film received special honors at Cannes film festival.
future. *Moksha* (=heaven) is for those who can overcome this disease of distinctions (Sunny Joseph, context.A-1970s).

Sunny Joseph equates the secular ‘spirituality of the Present’ with the ‘politics of the Present’. Since interconnectedness is the key principle of secular spirituality, it connects the sacred and the secular, spirituality and politics and human beings with all living beings. ‘To live and let live’ becomes the dynamic principle of life instead of any static political ideologies or religious doctrines.

A person has only this simple politics: the politics of interconnectedness. A living being should have only one concern, to live and let live (creating space), applied to all living beings. My right to live depends on how I let others live their lives. A living being especially the humans will be able to let others live only if he or she is able to love the other as oneself (close to what Jesus said). ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself’ is the greatest politics (doctrine) in world/history. There is no ‘ism’ in this (Sunny Joseph, Context.A-1970s).

Though the spiritual virtues and altruistic attitudes borrowed from Christianity may lie hidden in the Marxian materialism, one can still find its roots in the ‘spiritual’ aspirations for a ‘heaven on earth’ of the Judeo-Christian traditions. Krishna Iyer reminds us that the word ‘spiritual’ is used by Marx more than one would expect from a materialist. Iyer does not even hesitate to locate an unseen spiritual force behind the dialectical materialist process, a force that leads thesis and anti-thesis to a synthesis (Iyer 1992). KGS, poet and leftist-Marxist fellow-traveller, finds ample scope for reading the ‘spirituality’ of Marx.

Marx has written a book ‘The economical and philosophical manuscripts of 1844’, where he describes what is communism step by step. A sentence in that description is: It (communism) is the return of himself to himself, a ‘*puna samagamam*’, it is a communion. Religions yesterday said that yoga/bliss is the union between men and (with) God, the union between *jeevatama* and *paramatma*. In a way Marx means the union of all human beings and this cosmos; the communist consciousness is the consciousness that one gets at the time of or as a result of the union of all human beings and the entire cosmos. (K.G.Sankara Pillai, context.A-1970s).

P.T.Kunjumuhammed takes the example of Abdul Rehman Sahib, on whose life his latest film project *Veeraputhran* is based, to talk about the give and take of the
spiritual and the material, the Marxian or other political ideologies and religious or spiritual traditions. This blend can happen only in a secular-spiritual pursuit:

Abdul Rahman was a staunch believer, he prayed five times (namaz)…Thursdays he fasted. He said about communism, “There comes and ideology that emphasises on labour/production…it should be a better theory, I suppose. Work/Production is important than capital.” His alliances were with left-thinking people  (P.T.Kujumuhammed, context.A-1970s).

Secular spirituality can become a true dialogue space, where a believer and a non-believer and believers of different faiths can appreciate and enrich one another. Civic Chandran and V.G.Thampy share their experiments and experiences at the `secular-spirituality’ project they ventured to bring into public discussion and debate as part of the Patabhedam Little magazine’s pursuit of alternative living and models of politics:

I remember bringing a Jamaat-e-Islami leader to Patabhedam discussion. He said he was a SUCI member first, and began to read Koran for the first time after seeing the series ‘Atmeeyathayude Nanarthangal’. K. Aboobacker, our friend from Kozhikode came to Thrissur and stayed with Narayanan mash…he said, ‘usually others let us do niskaram etc like an act of generosity. But here you’re genuinely interested in knowing what Islam is, with respect. We had this experience those days, of mutual respect among believers and non-believers. When someone sit in front of God, those moments are as creative as when another sits down to write a poem…we realised that (Civic Chandran, context.A-1970s).

Similar interest was taken by the `secular spirituality’ project in to dialogue with the ‘Liberation Theology’ movement among Christians:

We were interested in ‘Liberation theology’ and its new directions. I remember when we had approached Bp. Paulose Mar Paulose in this regard. We had demanded three books from him (the first he wrote on ‘Liberation Theology and Marxism’). In the second book (if he had written) we wished to open up some of his silence. He hadn’t read Gandhi, Sree Narayanan….so we were putting pressure on him to make the Liberation Theology ‘spiritual’, ‘Indian’ and ‘Kerala’. Thus we had brought in Father Kapen, his work ‘Counter culture for the 21st century’, and then M.M.Thomas (Civic Chandran,context.A).

Thampy throws light into the outcome of such meeting of rivers, how the socio-cultural and political spheres in Kerala society benefited from the give and take of the sacred and the secular:

You can see that the sacred has started overlapping with and complementing the secular. Look at words like kootayma (fellowship); there are more such
expressions that came to the secular, day-today life through the contact with the spiritual… the sphere of politics is looking for new idioms. There is a dearth of new idioms in the public sphere. We have lost the ‘warmth’ and ‘wetness’ of words… ‘sacred’ is able to provide such words/idioms. This is what a believer can give to the secular (V.G.Thampy, context.A-1070s).

‘Secular-Spiritual’ is another way of describing the same compound reality that Lata Mani calls ‘SacredSecular’. Maybe because of its strong footing in the secular reality/experience, ‘secular-spiritual’ is the expression apparently preferred in the circle of intellectuals, artists and activists in Kerala. These compound expressions ‘SacredSecular’ and ‘secular-spiritual’ may be misunderstood as an attempt at creating a ‘unified framework’ to view the complex realm of the sacred (religion, religious traditions and practices, religious revivalism, fundamentalism and so on) and the secular (scientific, rational, critical responses to the perceived dangers of religion).

On the contrary, sacred-secular or secular-spiritual is seen as possible alternatives to resist the unitary and oppressive religious and political structures and dominant ideologies. Secular-Spiritual cannot be a wishful thinking, but an organic process evolving from the collective lived experiences of diverse populations, situated in a wide range of socio-cultural and political contexts. ‘Meeting of Rivers’, of alternative spiritualities and secular movements from the margins and the mainstream, where ordinary peoples’ faith and aspirations are rooted, could open up new spaces for dialogue. Lata Mani proposes SacredSecular as an extended invitation to contemplate the possibility that the ethical and libeartory dimensions of sacred and secular frameworks can fruitfully invigorate each other and in turn, strengthen our ability to address the pressing issues of our time (Mani 2009).

6.2.2 Many small voices and shades

Heteroglossia (other/many tongues/voices), the concept proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin, perhaps can better represent the tension between the diverse and decentralised secular-spiritual movements and the centred, official/dominant religious and political ideologies and structures. Heteroglossia for Bakhtin, is a centrifugal force, contrasted with the opposing tendency towards centralisation, the centripetal force. In the spirit of Bakhtin, Gavin Flood notes that any discourse “is riven with tension and contradiction inherent within it, the centripetal force tending towards unified, clear meaning, giving
voice to a dominant powerful ideology and social group, the centrifugal force tending towards difference, ambiguity and allowing other voices to speak, and other, subversive ideas and subaltern social groups to be expressed” (Flood 1999:157).

The centrist and essentialist tendencies of religion have always provoked many independent and predominantly leftist thinkers, activists and artists in India to opt for secularism as the only solution. But secularism, the way it is implemented in India as an imitation of the European modernity, does not always jell with the ‘Indian way’ as we have already discussed. It also fails to acknowledge the centrifugal forces embedded in the alternative and subaltern spiritual movements of our country. Those many small and fragmented voices and shades of spiritualities are in fact complementary to the secular. We find such awareness emerging in the Kerala society; more recognition accorded to the divergent streams of spiritualities and their joining hands with secular movements is also witnessed. A good number of the research participants are aware of the possible dialogue spaces that the secular-spiritual model offers in life, art and activism and many of them are active participants in such dialogues.

Rosy Thampy, who has written two books concerning feminine spiritual imagination, sthraina atmeeyatha (feminine spirituality) and sthrainathayude atmabhashanangal (feminine spiritual monologues) is happy that spirituality has slowly entered the common secular parlance in Kerala and newer forms/expressions are emerging:

From the 2000s onwards people have started using the word ‘spiritual’ quite often.... ‘Eco spirituality’ is one area where the word easily got acceptance in secular circles. After ‘politics of environment’ and ‘eco feminism’, now ‘eco spirituality’ is discussed widely. There is a lot of talk about ‘religion-less spirituality’. Gandhi has returned and is being discussed widely and we talk about ‘Gandhian spirituality’.....When I first came to Thrissur, doing research on Bible, everyone reacted as if that was something to do with the ‘Church’. But now in 2010 when I talk or write about ‘feminine spirituality’ there are many people responding. These expressions are commonly accepted now; ‘feminine spirituality’, ‘eco spirituality’ etc., not in a religious sense, but in a broader sense (Rosy Thampy, context. B).

Sara Joseph shares her hope in subversive forms of non-institutional, creative spiritualities sprouting out from within the institutionalised religions:
In a true religion I see the possibility of many individual and independent creative centres sprouting up, not restricted by formal, institutional structures. I see the possibility of diverse creative forces sprouting out in Christianity for example, and in other religions. Such creative forces may violate the boundaries of the established religions and their structures. Such ‘spiritual flights’ is ultimate freedom and ecstasy. If religion can come out to the level of ecstasy, it would bring about a big difference. Talking about Sufi, that singing and the ecstasy it creates last to the eternity; but established religions take away this ecstasy with their rituals, institutions and formal structures (Sara Joseph context A).

In order to speak on the soothing shade that small, fragmented, less glamorous spiritualities extend to us, KGS leads us to a scene in a film by Andrei Tarkovski:

See how Alexander in `The Sacrifice' attempts to give life to a withered tree that he tries to plant and tries to ‘raise to life’….That tree without leaves is supported by numerous leaves and plants on the ground. The big tree without any leaves is surviving because it stands over an array of herbs and plants. Till yesterday we always had longed for the shade of a master, a guru, the shade of the ’saviour’, a shade that we can physically see for ourselves…but more important is the little shades that these small plants and herbs that we trample down are creating. We need to recognize the value of such small shades. The shade that we feel under an umbrella, or the shade of big concrete sky scrapers are not real shades. For the same reason we can’t find or trace spirituality in the same way, in the same intensity of ‘limelight’ of the world of glamour; mostly true spirituality will be ‘underground’, in the womb of the earth, sometimes beyond the clouds; beyond the seas and the horizons….It is a blessing to every living being (KGS, context.A-1970s).

Rosy identifies changing attitudes brought in by the secular-spiritual culture, attitudes that are evolving as a new ‘political climate’ in the 1990s and beyond:

Earlier, people, leaders all used to ‘roar’ with arguments, but not anymore. People now prefer to talk quiet and be at peace (with a few exceptions)….Now people are not preaching, but sharing. Also even leaders admit things they don’t know (earlier it was never done). …And also people, speakers and isteners, know that there are different sides to one and the same thing, and different ways to say a thing….Maybe it is a character of being spiritual (and especially of feminine spirituality), not to be argumentative but be understanding and compassionate….This is a new spirituality, of being small and calm and be happy about it; (Rosy Thampy, context.B)

Taking the cue from these partipants’ views, we shall now look at some new, alternative forms of spiritualities that have emerged in the Kerala socio-cultural

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61 ‘The Sacrifice’ is the last film of the renowned Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovski. There is a little elaborate discussion on Tarkovsky’s films later in this chapter.
spheres in response to similar explorations across the country and also abroad. Most of these new spiritualities could be broadly classified under the non-institutional, `secular-spiritual’. But when we talk about the meeting of rivers and dialogical conversation involving multiple voices, along with the alternative streams of spiritualities, we need to include those spirituality models that function within the confines of established religions too. They mostly function as a corrective force, but always drawing energy for sustenance from conventional faith and practices.

There is no intention of systematically defining these diverse streams of spiritualities and reviewing their evolution and present state of affairs; we only listen to the accounts of the research participants and through such conversations try to visualise the contours of these experiments/experiences. Not all these views come from full-fledged practitioners of any streams of spiritualities that we examine here. The `working titles’, under which we have grouped certain patterns we recognized in peoples’ thinking and acting, also show the tentative nature of this endeavour, which cannot exhaust the full scope of the secular-spiritual `heteroglossia’ and fully interpret its significance.

6.2.2.1 Eco-Feminine spiritualities: Many women, in search of alternatives, have initiated new ways of being and living, even transgressing the orthodox boundaries and proscriptions of the society and religious/other organizations that they are part of. Sara Joseph locates the roots of Earth-centred, feminine spiritualities in the aspirations of humanity and the whole cosmos to have alternative visions and models other than the present male-centred and man-centred models of development.

The male-centred world of development (and the male centred philosophy of life) so far could only pollute water, pollute earth and halt production and make us all consume poison. Realizing this, women are saying there should be an alternative (‘another world is possible’). What would be that alternative? It is connected to the spirituality of earth, of water and of religions. In such an alternative world view how will you produce? How will you procreate and tend for the next generation? (Sara Joseph, context.A-1970s).
Sugathakumari, the poet who became the great champion of environmental causes like the ‘Silent Valley movement’, expressed her concerns in a radio interview, about the present destructive models of life and development:

Our nature is polluted, vegetables are full of pesticides. I look at man (whom I call the most cruel animal on earth) approaching the brim of suicide. I am sad, feel sorry when I think of our next generations and what is in stock for them.

Sara Joseph criticises our age old religious traditions that are handiworks of the patriarchal hegemony and bulwarks of perpetuating a male-centred society and its schemes at the expense of alternative visions, expressions and aspiration of life:

As a woman, something that have disturbed me is that our concept of God, our sacred books and teachings are all constructed by men, and most of them are male-versions (of domination). There is no conflict if I am a person who blindly believes in all these ‘constructed’ concepts and practices. But I am a person who prefers to be rational and who lives in a scientific world. What disturbs me is that the male-dominated constructions are promulgated as faith and the feminine reality doesn’t have any scope of inclusion in the spectrum, in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, where all major functions of creation, preservation and destruction are all prerogatives of male gods (Sara Joseph, context. A).

Janaki cites an alternative model of spiritual practice among middle aged women, which is a rather recent phenomenon and such models perhaps offer possibilities of subversion inside the male-dominated religious traditions, theology and practices, even if these sporadic efforts may not go nowhere near unsettling the patriarchal religious structures:

There is a new trend of prayer gatherings (bhajan Sangh) in homes coordinated by a group of middle aged or elderly women. If there is a birthday of an elderly person (woman) in some houses, this group of women go there, conduct a prayer meeting, read from scriptures, recite bhajans etc. They do this very professionally. This is a group of housewives, not trained in rituals. But they get autonomy for that time being without depending on men folk. Not only autonomy but also it creates an intense social interaction. This may not be seen as radical, may not appear as a revolution, but these groups of women get an independent space, they claim it. We usually slot such women of their age (elderly) as ‘pious women’, who take recourse to reading Ramayana and scriptures and shut themselves in their homes. These groups of women do read Ramayana etc, but they are creating waves by coming out and finding their

62 This two-part interview aired by All India Radio, Thrissur station in 2010 reviewed the significance of the ‘Green Movement’ in Kerala, in the context of the 25th year of the ‘Silent Valley’ campaign.
own space, which the conventional society hasn’t assigned to them (Janaki, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Rosy Thampy questions the traditional religious thinking that sacrifice is a virtue (mostly in Christian circles), and usually imposed on women as her supreme ideal. She feels that instead of such tendencies of self-negation, happiness and joy should be promoted as true goal of spirituality.

There is no such word/reality called sacrifice. I, as a mother, if I do something for my children (when they were babies and now) it is not my sacrifice. I do it because it makes me happy as a woman and mother. I tell my students not to say ‘thank you’ after my class because they too deserve ‘thank you’ for making me happy. It is not the pleasure principle of Freud, but it is ‘bliss’ (what the sages said). Christ’s death on the cross was not his sacrifice, but his love for us, for humanity. He didn’t say ‘God is sacrifice’, but he said, ‘God is love’. Spirituality is in a way our desire and need to be together, with others, to be with the ‘divine’ and be happy (Rosy Thampy, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Sara Joseph expands the ‘spirituality of womanhood and motherhood’ further and extols unconditional love, which is another expression of justice. She goes on to suggest that it is high time that the society started listening to a ‘woman’s solutions’ against war, violence, wrong model of development and so on. These solutions are percolated from a deep-going feminine spiritual outlook.

The philosophy of a mother preparing and serving meals in her kitchen is the same philosophy of any religious or spiritual visionaries. Like Christ, a mother gives to everyone in her family what is needed for each one. She doesn’t deny anything to any members. There is a sense of justice in this, very close to what Jesus said about justice, ‘Let justice flow like water’. As water flows to the lower depths, a mother’s love and care will flow to the neediest among her children, her son or daughter who is weak in anything. I’m praising ‘motherhood’, I am not praising womanhood. I feel that the language that God speaks is a woman’s language (Sara Joseph).

6.2.2.2 Spirituality of the Marginalised: One possible reason for people taking a cautious approach to religions and spiritualities, apart from principled objection/aversion to spiritualism, is that conventional, institutional religion and spiritualities all appear as just one package for many people, often coloured by upper caste values and agendas. This typical bias favouring mainstream religions and spiritual movements (also the recent mass mobilizations around ‘god-men’) may inadvertently leads to a failure in recognizing and acknowledging alternative
spiritualities at the margins, of the Adivasis, Dalits, women and spiritualities of religious minorities. One should not forget history that it was always in the interest of the mainstream, whether it was the colonizers or the religious nationalist or other majority cultures, that the diverse cultures and traditions were silenced and were always pushed further to the margins. V. G. Thampy looks at the different spiritualities, especially those from the subaltern groups, as counter cultures.

Spirituality movements always have been prophetic. Today when everyone is going by the same standard/pleasures, spirituality could see for the future and fight for what it sees. Those counter cultures could be colourful because of their diversity…. Today’s culture is male-oriented, consumerist, violent, lustful or greedy, and centrist. True spirituality is confronting the vices of such a culture, because spirituality is what takes life forward, when the majority would love to maintain the status quo (V.G.Thampy, context. A-1970s).

K.P. Sasi, filmmaker, calls attention to Dalit spirituality and adivasi spiritualities as two important streams that our cultural activists should shift their focus to:

The secular forces have not given much importance to the spiritual colonialism undertaken by the upper castes on these two sections so far. I believe that Hindutva of the Sangh Parivar is a continuation of the spiritual invasion of the upper castes, converting Dalits and Adivasis as Hindus, a process continuing even today. Unless we defend the faith systems of the marginalised communities in this country, all the discussion on `sacred and secular' will remain an urban middle class affair. We should even have a discourse on Sikh spirituality and Buddhist spirituality since the Sangh Parivar is treating them as part of `Hindu' Religion.

What the colonisers did to the indigenous people in different parts of the world, what different sects of Christians are doing through conversion, what the high caste Hindus are doing to the Adivasis and other subaltern cultures through `Brahminisation' are all in effect destroying the spirituality of the marginalised. George Pulikuthyl takes issue with the Christian missionaries whose intentions behind their services, he feels, are questionable.

A complaint I have against the attitude of the religious/charitable workers is that they are condescending to people whom they supposedly should serve. Priests and nuns working in Kamathipura, Mumbai told me that their main

63 Sasi’s comment forms part of an online discussion that the team members of ViBGYOR Film Festival, Thrissur had among themselves in 2009 in view of organizing a Conference on Sacred Secular in South Asian context.
activity was to give Bible classes to sex workers. I call all these as ‘vulgarization’ of religion and society. These religious workers are not trying to understand the situation of people whom they are supposedly serving in the larger context. Without discussing what their problems are, what their rights are, what cultural context they come from, what are the structural causes and possible long term solutions etc., religious workers are exclusively looking after the so called ‘spiritual’ side. To win people over to their religion is their ultimate intention (George Pulilikuthyil, context.B).

6.2.2.3 Religionless Spiritualities: Next we shall examine two streams of spiritualities one after another, as they are contrasted by a ‘with’/‘without’ religion distinction. Many research participants from Context A that is ‘1970s’ have begun to consider spiritualities only very recently. Because of the atheist/leftist/radical standpoints they adhered to in the 1970s, it is not easy for most of them with the ‘70s hangover’ to feel at home with religions and spiritualities directly connected to conventional religions. K.P.Kumaran, filmmaker, whose début film Athithi was launched in the 1970s, still continues to make films even in the 2000s. In between he had a short time association with the Naxalite movement too. Now when he is in his seventies, he has begun taking interest in spirituality, but not in any readily available models.

I am for a non-religious spirituality in the context of today’s religious fundamentalism. That is possible; whether spirituality is a human imagination, is it real or man-made etc is a different question. In the history of humanity, spiritual search has been a tool for existence, a moving force for going forward. Those who don’t want to commit suicide and need a reason to go forward, spiritual search may help them keep going.….In future, in 100 years, like in the present Europe, Kerala also may become a religionless society, who knows? (K.P. Kumaran, context.A).

KGS speaks of spirituality not in any religious denominational terms, but in metaphysical imagination and unbounded expressions of love and compassion, in one word ‘communion’:

Rain doesn’t discriminate between the good and bad, Hindu or Muslim or Christian; spirituality is also the same, it’s a blessing on everyone. Spirituality is that ‘humanness’, which remains beyond all kinds of man-made divisions and separations of colour, race, religion, gender etc. This is the zenith of perfection or holiness that all religions dream about. This is the space that all revolutionary ideals and ideologies like Communism dream about. “Communion” is the word to describe that experience where the distinction or
contradiction between existence and essence cease to exist (or is taken away). It is a union of the self and the other (KGS, context. A).

P.T. Kunjumuhammed considers spiritual pursuit as fundamental to human existence, but does not agree to tag spirituality with ‘heaven’ or ‘happiness after death’ and for that reason, he is only comfortable with non-conventional spiritual traditions like ‘Sufism’, detached from the strictures of institutional religions:

If you have a mind that still is seeking answers, then you go on with your spiritual search/seeking. I don’t love God in order to enter heaven. I remember the Sufi poetess Rabia Tul Bashir who said, “God, if you are planning to give me heaven for my love for you, give it to someone else. I only need your love” (P.T.Kunjumuhammed, context.A, 1970s).

Shanmugadas does not adhere to any religious beliefs and practices, but has always shown interest in religious and non-religious forms of spiritualities. He considers the tenets of Zen Buddhism as easily going along with his aptitudes since this stream of Buddhist spirituality does not impose any frame work on the seeker.

In Zen Buddhism there is an ultimate freedom, without joining any organized religion, you can follow a spiritual path/faith. That possibility is there in Zen Buddhism, to follow your faith without becoming a member of an institutionalised religion. Dalai Lama says (in the film ‘Kalachakra’ I guess): “You don’t have to become Buddhist after giving up your culture. You can be yourself and be a Buddhist too”….A time may come when Christianity also may be like this, a ‘no-denominational, free Christianity’. One good thing about Zen Buddhist type of spiritual pursuit is you may not feel bounded by the same kind of guilt feelings etc by which the precepts of an institutionalised religion enslave you (Shanmugadas).

The comments of KGS, on the ‘Osho spirituality’ that boosted many other ‘New Age spiritualities’ in the West, look very apt to sum up this section:

Osho Rajneesh celebrates a spirituality without borders, no hassles of dos and don’ts, no sexual/pure-impure inhibitions, no religious or moral restrictions. He tried to create a public sphere of humanness/humaneness. He brings everything to the level of experience, anubhava (experience) or anubhooti (ecstacy). Eating, mating, sleeping all are the same for him, no distinctions; for him what is important is ananda, happiness enjoyed without inhibitions, in freedom. For him a synonym for spirituality is freedom, not joy (KGS).

6.2.2.4 Spiritualities within religions: People, who feel that the structures of organized religions are restricting their availability to the broad secular-spiritual
mission, do break out of those structures and seek the authentic spiritual life they had envisaged out in the ‘open’. But there are others, who take up the challenge of living their spirituality within the confines of an institutional religion and still dare to be different. V.G. Thampy is a poet, filmmaker, college teacher and was the pioneer of the little magazine series ‘Rasana’ and a key figure in the ‘Patabhedam’ little magazine and especially in their secular-spiritual dialogues is one such individual who have taken up this challenge. When it comes to discussing secular spiritualities, Thampy finds it problematic that secular-spiritual is mostly addressed from the angle of non-believers, since most participants do not adhere to beliefs or practices of any religion. Whereas his case is totally different as he addresses secular-spiritual from a believer’s point of view along with all baggage that accompanies a believer.

A free, non-believer can talk volumes on spirituality in very imaginative, poetic ways. On the other hand, it is also important to live inside a faith/religion, within its limitations and scope, and find spirituality there through a struggle from inside (V.G.Thampy, context.A-1970s).

Thampy is convinced that as in his case, the quest for spirituality begins when one encounters loneliness but not any answers within the given structure of the religion he grew up and in its assurances. If in those moments the individual dares to face his own self, this may lead to the encounter of the bigger ‘Self’ (the Divine). Thampy takes inspiration from the model of Jesus, whose life he makes his point of reference:

I see Jesus as a reference point always. I try to reflect on Jesus’ private life and the public life and how he made them both creative. In his public life he was very sensitive, the greatest communicator ever. It was not a verbal communication, but in all senses. In his private life he had friendship with all sorts of people, men and women, very profound relationships. In this there is selection, discretion etc; he takes only three to Mount Tabor. He goes to Bethany, relates to Martha and Mary (and loves Mary more). These were his ways of addressing loneliness. And if these were not enough he would go up Mount Olive and communicate with his heavenly Father, where he wept, prayed and thus getting refreshed he came back to public life (Thampy, context.A-1970s).

Sara Joseph does not find her membership in Christian religion as very helpful in her encounter of the self, because instead of the presence of god in her life through the scriptures, rituals and practices, she is experiencing more of his absence and she believes that the only way she can make him present in her moments of crisis is to
insert herself, her feminine imagination and sensitivity into the patriarchal architecture of the conventional religion and thus create ‘cracks’ from within.

There is something I want to ask Jesus: ‘why didn’t you take my company when your sweat turned into blood in the garden of Gethsemane?’ If it were me I wouldn’t have slept in those moments when you were suffering. I can’t sleep when you are bleeding there; me as mother, sister or lover, as woman, can’t sleep when you are suffering…that side of ‘Jesus and his women friends’ is dark and hidden in the Christian churches. I’m interested in such studies. When I try to identify with Christ in my own way, I will be creating my own version of the Bible. My reading of the Bible is surely from my vision as woman. From that point of view, Bible will change its tone and colour…I will read Bible from the bottom. That reading of Bible also would incorporate me wherever I am not there. (Sara Joseph)

Krupa, a popular film actor, has not experienced much conflicts and struggles of being ‘inside’ a conventional religion and ‘outside’, in the apparently ‘secular’, glamorous world of cinema. Unlike Thampy and Sara Joseph and many of their contemporaries ‘from the 70s’, who still struggle with the restricting structures of religions, Krupa shares her comfort in adhering to the conventional religious environment.

I am someone who was brought up in Hindu faith. And I believe in that; I go to temple, pray and all. I believe in the power of prayer. Whatever rational explanations people may try to give to it, I believe in the power of prayer. You can call me ‘pious’ that way. If the other person of another faith realises that how important my faith is to me, and I understand how important their faith is for them, we can avoid tensions/frictions in the name of religion (Krupa, context.c-1990s and beyond).

Leo Tadeus, who also belongs to the ’1990s’ group, has already directed two full fiction feature films and very similar to Krupa, he too finds it not hard to find nourishment for his spiritual needs from within the conventional religious structures. The following is his outlook on religion and spirituality.

When a group defines and structuralise a specific spirituality for them it becomes their religion. It is like how culture is formed: a set of people mould their lives according to certain customs, life styles etc….for me my religion (Christianity) is the base/support to practice my spirituality; it is a context. I have likes and dislikes, agreements/disagreements about this structure (Leo Tadeus, context.C, 1990s and beyond).

George Pulikuthyil, who gave up his membership in a religious congregation but has not fully renounced his priestly vocation, presents his typical case:
I feel I am more authentic in my sanyasa (religious life) now than when I was a ‘member’ in a religious community. I have seen a few Christian priests/nuns, who break out of structures and then live a religious/priestly life as per their personal authentic definition. If one can take sanyasa to that extent, I consider radical religion and radical politics essentially connected (Adv. George Pulikuthyil, context.B-1970s to 90s).

6.2.2.5 ‘Spirituality of Being Alive’: Another way to describe this model is ‘the spirituality of simple living’ or ‘the spirituality of simply living’ and in some sense this represents the zenith of the secular-spiritual pursuit. Here a saying by a 4th century Christian saint, Irenaeus, assumes renewed significance, ‘God’s glory is in man becoming fully alive’.

T.V. Chandran, filmmaker, who has gone through many phases and facets of a certain radical political and cultural movement sprouted in Kerala in the 1970s in response to a general climate political turbulence across the world. Some prominent figures, like John Abraham and Pavithran, who along with Chandran witnessed many ups and downs of that movement of the 70s and its extended joys in the field of cinema are not with him in the 2000s. He is alive, is making films and is addressing the drastically changing socio-political situations in his unique ways. I asked him the same question I had posed to many of the research participants, ‘what is spirituality for you?’ And he answered: To live itself its spiritual!

For those who view ‘secular-spiritual’ as the politics of the present socio-cultural context in Kerala, ‘to live’ itself is spiritual. Being fully alive, alert and sensitive to the needs and challenges of our present age is a very spiritual act. Artists, activists, intellectuals, secularists and believers who acknowledge and celebrate the beauty and diversity of many small narratives/stories of existence and survival, are also concerned with the return of regressive forces. These centrist political, religious and other ideologies consciously try to drag our individual and collective perceptions of reality into different versions of a ‘glorious’ past. A secular-spirituality that is rooted in the Present, Here and Now, and is founded on love and compassion for all living beings is one sure strategy for addressing and confronting the regressive and revivalist forces. Such secular-spiritual movements/initiatives will also emphasise a simple living,
resisting the lure of the ever pervasive global market and the extravaganza of consumerism.

The Spirit of the spirituality of the Present is reflected in the observations of P.T.Kunjumuhammed, filmmaker and Sunny Joseph, cinematographer, whose concerns for cinema and spirituality flow from and to the same or similar sources and destinations:

I am a believer, and believe that God created all these beings. My right to life is connected to the tree standing on my yard….I believe in God, but not in sacrifices and rituals of the religion. I believe in the bonding of all living beings. So my heaven (in the line of Marx) is to be created here, not in the sky, after life. I have limitations, selfishness etc; each work of art is my attempt to purify myself. (P.T.Kunjumuhammed, context.A-1970s)

If a religion tells people “you will get heaven tomorrow for your sufferings of today” it can’t be a valid religion; true religious spirit is to be with the ‘sufferer’ in this present moment. In this sense, Karl Marx could be a true ‘religious’ man! Many have said that Marx is the first true Christian. True politics and revolution consists in love and compassion for all living beings, living and letting everyone live. Why did Che Guevara say, “I will fight till I will be able to wipe out the tears of all mothers in the society?” So Love and true Revolution are one and the same (Sunny Joseph, context.A-1970s).

Basheer Mechary, writer, who feels that he lost so much of the ‘small’ world of his childhood and youth when he was an ‘exile’ in Arabian Gulf, has now returned to his roots and his fond ambiences in Kerala. He has a very clear cosmic spiritual vision, which he considers as his politics and his way of life.

My ideology is to address my local/small environment/surroundings: if there is decay there, why so? If there is development, how so? These are my primary concerns. My vision/outlook comes from the analysis of the local. Even now, I am attracted to the Nature and its wonders. The other day I closely observed and followed a fire fly. I also listen to the sounds in the nature in the night and day. I wait outside to listen to those sounds. I want to sleep with my windows wide open; all those sounds are very dear to me (Basheer Mechary, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Rosy Thampy also shares a yearning for the simple things in life, in other words for a simple way of living.

When I think of my spirituality I envy my parents; am sure I don’t experience the same peace they had enjoyed. They didn’t have the salary I get and the
fame and name I get in the society today; but they were calmer than me, they could sit at home enjoy peace and also be concerned about me and my siblings. So I miss that spirituality, which my parents and that generation had formed themselves in because now I am cut off from my circumstances (Rosy Thampy, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Basheer Mechari’s love for the local reality/environment and Rosy’s lament about the loss of peace and calm are another expressions for the love for the present, the immediate reality that Sunny Joseph talks about, which he then equates to the reality of Cinema and calls it the art of NOW. He says that cinema is the best medium/means to make humans convinced that there is only NOW; to love all living beings NOW is what both true spirituality and true cinema would prompt us to do. Any ‘politics’ or religion that is against love is against humanity, is against life and against art.

All autocratic ideologies and practices are against love. But the problem with the word love is that it is a totally misused and abused word. So I prefer more primitive words (less used) like `arul’, `anpu’ etc. In Adoor’s `Nizhalkuthu’ the girl asks the shepherd boy pointing to his flute, how does music comes from this?’ He says `it comes from anpu’. So music, cinema and every art is love! It can’t be otherwise (Sunny Joseph, context.A).

V.G. Thampy emphasises ‘personal is political’ as the core of the spirituality of the present and of simple living, whose different expressions we are examining here:

Our personal need for friendship and networking doesn’t have to be treated as selfishness. If the ‘personal’ is broadened then it has numerous possibilities. Small networks can be further linked and can come together for greater causes. Narayana Guru was right: `avanavanatma sukhatvincharikunnathu aparunnam sukhatnayi varenam’ (virtuous things that you observe for your own spiritual benefit should benefit others too). For this, I should be happy first. Christ also said: `Love your neighbour as yourself’, and `The Kingdom of God is within you’. Real spirituality is to find the kingdom within you, enjoy it and then share it with others in love. This is very old thing, but now more people have begun to assert it (V.G. Thampy, context.A-1970s).

To find the ‘kingdom’ within and be content about it, one needs to listen to her/his heart, instead of flooding it with ever increasing needs that mostly rise out of our greed. Feeling sedated under the over dose of consumerism, more people are now thinking on how to strike a balance; many find an answer in ‘return to simplicity’. Some others go to the extent of self-renunciation, which does not mean abandoning your life, wife, children and house, but inculcating a new spirit of learning from the
experience of having less. Basheer Mechary and Shanmugadas share these aspects of the ‘spirituality of simple living’.

What we should be concerned more is the consumerism that is totally changing our life style; it’s there everywhere in the world. Also after one stage of science and its development, it has turned out to be ‘technology against humanity’. All companies are making huge profits. I find significance for Gandhism, because only such models can work on our personality. I challenge myself: can I give up mobile phone? What if we don’t use microwave? And don’t paint inside the house? We will be always tempted to do as all others do (Basheer Mechary, context.B, 1970s to 90s).

Shanmugadas recalls the urge for renunciation, inherent in him, and underscores it as the need of our times:

In the same line of my thought about death from my days of youth, I remember my desire for renunciation, the decision not to have anything of my own. Is it in our genes? There is a realization that giving is greater than receiving. It is a strange thing in humans: one who doesn’t have much always wants to have more and more. Those who have more may feel like giving up and giving to others, who don’t have (Shanmugadas, context.A).

Sugathakumari urges lovers of Nature and all those who are engrossed in amassing wealth and comforts to cut on our needs and desires:

Humans need to be humble, abandoning greed…as Gandhi said, “Earth has provided everything as per everyone’s need, but not for anyone’s greed”. The earth and the universe will be consumed by the ever increasing greed of humans and their developmental projects…what you and me could do are very small things in our humble surroundings. Do that (Interview by Hakkim 2009).

6.3 The Transcendent and the Immanent in Life and Art

Contemplating on the response of an artist to the challenges of today and tomorrow, T. V.Chandran, the filmmaker, feels that the raw side of today’s reality is that there is not much hope; there is not much scope to see goodness around you or across the world.

Take the case of Auschwitz, the holocaust by the Nazis was the most gruesome atrocities of this century, violence against humanity. But how do we take it when the survivors of the holocaust or their third generation repeat almost the same kind of cruelties to the Palestinians? It only shows that it is not goodness that prevails but selfishness, greed and intolerance (T.V.Chandran, context. A).
Lata Mani shares similar disillusionment and loss of faith after the genocide in Gujarat in 2002 and the insensitivity on the part of the State and many secularists towards the continuing communal hatred and possible flares ups any moments. But Mani chooses to hope against hope ‘in times like these’ that T.V. Chandran finds as devoid of goodness and hope. She proposes to bring together all peace-loving, creative forces into dialogue and action on a SacredSecular platform:

Charged times require calm contemplation. The greater the din made by the forces of hate, the deeper the need for poetry, song, philosophy, for pursuing those questions that disturb the assumptions to which we cleave. The outpouring on the internet and in the media after the post-Godhra massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 is the surprising of precisely such a desire to think, rethink and speak out, again and again, in the name of our humanity or to draw on spiritual vernacular, our divine potential (Mani 2009: 123).

Cinema, the art of Here and Now, a celebration of immanence-transcendence, has greater possibilities of mediating the human-divine encounters in our times and drawing strength from these encounters, we can address our challenges. In the new alternative spiritualities of the new millennium, the divine is not sought up above or beyond the natural, but in the living Present, in the raw realities of life that Chandran warns us about. As the secular-spiritual by definition works against all separation/compartmentalization, the encounter of the divine that secular-spiritual proposes and works out in life, art and all creative and contemplative endeavours would treat all goals of human life, artha, kama, dharma and moksha with equal significance and respect and not in any inferior-superior, high-low scrupulosity of the old. Kapen says: “The Divine announces itself in the two-in-oneness of sexual love, in the growing into, and merging with, each other of wedded existence, in friendship and the communion of shared hope and struggles….and in the sensuous revelation of meaning that are works of art” (Kapen 1994: 51).

Art and Cinema in particular, celebrate eros or sensuous desire; the conflict created by unfulfilled desires is an ever recurring theme in films. Religious doctrines, especially in the Western Judeo-Christian traditions, demeaned eros as the cause of sin and used sin to scare people to the extent that people would have to take recourse to religion and its practices of piety, seeking to wash away the never ending feeling of guilt. This
burden of guilt has turned out to be a political game that the conventional politics of religion as well as the conventional politics of Cinema play out constantly, creating victims and addicts. Not very positive responses are expected from the conventional political games of religion and cinema, both institutions being male-centred, promoting and perpetuating patriarchal value systems. Only redefined and re-articulated politics of cinema and religion could address the multi-dimensionality of life, incorporating insights from the subaltern, feminist and ecological politics and spiritualities, in one word, from the secular-spiritual heteroglossia.

Cinema, if it uses its humanizing potential well, can continue to be an alternative to the `commodities’ produced and marketed by the mass media entertainment industry. Cinema by its very nature and format has the capacity to present life larger than our casual, calculated and fragmented day-today living. Compare it with Television, which is more immediate, family-oriented and revenue-oriented entertainment or the Internet, which stills remains a private/personal medium though it has created a new sense of a ‘virtual community’ through social network sites. On the contrary, cinema still provides actual ‘community’ entertainment, whether in a home theatre, at a film festival venue, in a small multiplex theatre or in a big movie hall. Cinema offers vast possibilities for reflection and at times for action even after we leave the movie theatre or other viewing facilities. We cannot relegate cinema to the level of mere entertainment. We call a movie a good one, when it touches you or shakes you or challenges you or do more. Sunny Joseph’s comment beautifully underscores the immanence-transcendence of the cinematic medium, by linking sensuality to spirituality.

Like surata or samboga is a doorway to nirvana, being in the world of cinema is more than just watching images and sounds….people will slowly realize this, will realize the connection between cinema and spirituality (Sunny Joseph, context. A).

Cinema comes very close to spiritual experience, when we watch those classical, master works of filmmakers like Tarkovski, Bergman, Bresson, Satyjit Ray, Aravindan and others, when we are reminded of the interconnectedness between the humans anywhere in the world and our communion with all living beings and Nature.
Resul Pookutty⁶⁴, the Oscar Award winner, is amazed at the phone calls and mails he receives even from people abroad, sharing their experience of relating to the soundscape that Resul had created for his films. We notice that people from across the world can relate to what we create as local-specific in our films. Art and cinema in particular, connect people at broader levels that escape logical explanations. We could only perhaps explain it as experiences that belong to a higher realm, the realm of the SacredSecular or the Secular-Spiritual.

KGS insists that a secular spirituality, which is the need of our times, is already alive, but hidden among us, and it is not for us to name it and formalise it, lest it become another form of institutionalised religion. It exists in the intentions of numerous individuals, who lived for the world: doctors, musicians, and many others in different fields of human activities that enriched humanity, the world and the universe. All these were different streams of spiritualities, expressed in different forms of cinema, painting, music and whatever.

I believe that such a spirituality does exist in our time, but we live in a time when we need to attend to, to listen to that spirituality than attempt to express it and formalise it. A word, before it is spoken, is formed and shaped in mind. Our call is to listen to the deepest voice of the time; it’s a time for meditation than preaching. We can’t pick fixed, ‘settled’ words or expressions or sentence of spirituality, because that word could be of yesterday’s spirituality. The Word of spirituality is yet to be pronounced. That’s the stage that spirituality is in now, it is not vacuum. It is a meditative sitting/posture. It is in the ‘womb’ of time. It will one day come into bright light, and that day we will properly understand Tarkovski and other secular mystics (KGS, context. A, 1970s).

Shanmugadas calls attention to ‘The Cave of Forgotten Dreams’, a film by German filmmaker Werner Herzog that takes us to the cave paintings in France, which are almost three times older than the Altamira caves, known as the symbol of human yearning for recreating movement through art. Humans, living in digital or stone age, cannot be ‘fully alive’ without realizing the need for self-realization through art, a need that can never be figured out and sufficiently explained by a materialist view of the world.

⁶⁴ Resul shared this experience in a personal, informal conversation. The same fact he has elaborated in his autobiography, Sabdatharapadam (Pengu 2010).
We all struggle for the basic needs, say material needs; at the same time there is another sphere, which we call as our culture, our spirituality, art etc. I read about Herzog’s very recent film on cave paintings….He shot it at caves in France and titled the film, ‘The Cave of Forgotten dreams’. These caves are some 36,000 years old (the Altamira caves are only 16,000 years old). So we find this continuity of the spiritual/ self-realization need in humans even in those who lived some 36,000 years ago. Art sometimes is defined as the realization of man’s need for eternity’ (Shanmugadas, cont. A-1970s).

Similar sentiments of wonderment of those ‘artists’ in the caves is what enables the humanity in our age and in the ages to come, to rise above earthly limitations and apparent meaninglessness and hopelessness in life and create. Every creator is god-like or god! Sunny Joseph connects the spirituality of every artistic endeavour to the child-like innocence and wonderment:

Maybe when we were children when we first saw the rainbow, we would have exclaimed, “wow!!” That wow is God! I keep telling students to watch the images from the Hubble Space telescope. When I see those images I say, “wow!” Malayalees exclaim, “ayyo!” What is “ayyo”? Ayyan was the god in prakrita (crude/pre-modern Malayalam). They all called God ayyan. That's perhaps one reason why Ayyapan is still such a popular god in Kerala (and south India). Today we have only Lord Ayyappan who carries the name ‘ayyan’. .. All arts should consider that their function is to preserve this wonder (“wow”/ “ayyo”). Art, in fact brings us back to our infancy/adolescence. We lose our wonder after infancy/adolescence. The means to regain that wonder is Art (Sunny Joseph, context A).

This inadequacy of words and ideas to explain the experience of the divine and the numerous but subtle ways in which artistic images can do this, is perhaps expressed in a popular haiku that I recently received as a text message on my mobile: “I asked the tree: Speak to me about God. And it simply blossomed”

First when I read this poem I got a feeling, the feeling of ‘being lost without words’, very similar to what I got listening to P.T. Kunjumuhammed, talking about art, knowledge and everything as hidayath.

We are all small when compared to the wealth of knowledge that humanity has acquired so far. There is this word hidayath (blessing) in Koran. Allah says that He gives hidayth not to people whom we think; He said to the Prophet, “you may see someone who is praying or not praying, but I have chosen whom I want to give hidayath.” Art is a hidayath from God (P.T. Kunjumuhammed, context. A, 1970s).
V.G. Thampy warns us that the divine acts in strange non-conventional ways that the ‘neat’ categories of conventional morality may not understand or could appreciate. Indeed, in human history we have ample examples of God choosing to bestow his hidayath on many artists, who in the eyes of ‘pious people’ were rebels, scoundrels and ‘indecent’.

Look at Bergman’s confrontations with faith….there are many others similarly struggling with God…and we get profound spiritual/God experiences through the works of such ‘rebels’. See Dostoyevsky ‘quarrelling’ with God……..he portrayed the evil in humans, his characters were ‘rascals’, but in total we get a profound God experience in his work. Externally his works may sound as ‘god-denial’, but they are highly spiritual searches (V.G.Thampy , context A).

Shanmugadas also confirms his firm belief in art as a spiritual experience, and artists as endowed with the blessing of immediate union with the divine like in yoga; art is where the immanent and the transcendent smoothly merge:

Art for me is a spiritual activity. During the Hippy movement and the anti-Vietnam war, many Westerners (especially Americans) got converted to Buddhism/Hinduism. When Garry Snyder went to learn yoga, the Guru asked him, ―Why should you do yoga? You are a poet‖. Why is art spiritual? What makes it spiritual is that you are not doing creative work in order to earn food (then it becomes commercial art). You may be remunerated for your creative work, but you do creative work in order to satisfy a need of yours that is more than earning food; it’s beyond your physical needs (Shanmugadas, context A).

Sunny Joseph agrees that an artist creates not for money, and it was the entry of money that stole the “wow”, the wonder from the humans for the first time. With the arrival of currency now all spontaneous experiences of wonder are replaced by money:

Now even the children would say ‘wow’ only when they get an expensive toy; or if we gift a grandma, say 5000 rupees, then she would say ‘wow’. Nowadays art has more exchange value than real estate or security bonds or whatever. Buy a painting by M.F.Hussein; you can preserve it as a most valuable currency. Thus money (market) will appropriate everything. God is already appropriated! Unfortunately we are living in a period where even art is appropriated by money (Sunny Joseph, context A).

Only art or artistic activity can overcome the limitations that money has created, Sunny is very convinced about it. True art can and should go beyond money because no one can ask ‘what is its value?’ it cannot be measured. Sara Joseph considers her
creative writing as a meditation in silence, where she is not alone, because her thoughts embrace all.

For me, spiritual experience occurs when in my silence I think about myself and others and when I translate those thoughts into creative writing or music or political activism…and the established religions are never able to give me this experience (Sara Joseph, context.A-1970s).

Andrei Tarkovski, the Russian filmmaker, considers artistic creation not as a means of self-assertion, but as a service to the ‘Other’ and to the ‘other’. He writes in `Sculpting Time’, his autobiography, “The artist is always a servant, and is perpetually trying to pay for the gift that has been given to him as if by a miracle” (Tarkovski 1987: 38).

Krupa, a very young cine actor, shares a similar sentiment of being chosen to be an artist as a blessing that comes from God:

I was fortunate to be an artist. I take it as God-given. I do maximum to cultivate my talent. But through my talent if I can give happiness to my audiences I consider it as my luck; this I feel especially when I dance for hours. I consider myself to be ‘blessed’ to have had the opportunity to be an artist. I consider it a blessing from God (Krupa, context.C-1990s and beyond).

P.T. Kunjumuhammed is active in politics and filmmaking and also in a television programme titled `Pravasi Lokam’, for the Malayalee Diaspora in the Arabian Gulf. He believes that his political as well as artistic activity connect all living beings and help other human beings in their search for truth. For him, all this turns out to be an outlet for self-purification and a path to spirituality that makes him strong and courageous:

My films are meant to connect human beings in their search for truth. I use the medium of cinema for my own search for truth. That truth connects me, you, the tree out there and a dog on the street; my cinema should create these common spaces,…I earn this purification through my film activity and political activity. Especially my programme `Pravasilokam’ has helped me to become strong spiritually. I’m thus relieved from fear…that’s how I muster courage (`nirbhayar aakaan = to be strong and courageous)…I am relieved from my fears and I become strong when I help others to get relieved from their fears. (P.T.Kunjumuhammed, Context A).

Nirabhayar aakaan (to be strong and courageous) that Kunjumuhammed talks about as a goal of artistic creation implies the angst of the artist, his own and on behalf of the humanity that encounters tyranny, oppression, and miseries of all kind, man-made and
natural. It comes close to the collective hopes and courage of a nation that Tagore writes about in ‘Gitanjali’. KGS finds freedom as an apt word, an equivalent to true spirituality. True artists like Tagore, Beethoven and others, and true revolutionaries like Ho Chi Minh all had mustered courage and creative force from their faith in freedom, though they might have called it by different names:

Beethoven’s 9th symphony uses the word ‘joy’, in the fourth movement of the ninth symphony. He recites the poem of Schiller “How shall I embrace you”. The ‘Ode to Joy’ comes in the fourth movement. Those days artists didn’t dare to use the word ‘freedom’, because it amounted to be imprisoned. So instead of freedom artists used joy or bliss…. True freedom is in our mind as Ho chi min writes in his `Jail Diary’: “Body is behind bars, but the mind escapes outside”. Freedom is not merely political freedom as the Marxists would say (KGS, context.A-1970s).

6.3.1 Immanence- Transcendence in World Cinema:

Describing the experience of the audiences of the first publically exhibited cinema L’Arrivee d’un Train en Gare de La ciotat (The arrival of train at station) by Lumiere brothers, Andrei Tarkovski writes in ‘Sculpting in Time’, his reflections on the art of cinema:

As the train approached panic started in the theatre: people jumped and ran away. That was the moment when cinema was born; it was not simply a question of technique, or just a new way of reproducing the world. What came into being was a new aesthetic principle. For the first time in the history of the arts, in the history of culture, man found the means to take an impression of time. And simultaneously, the possibility of reproducing that time on screen as often as he wanted, to repeat it and go back to it (Tarkovski 1987: 62).

Any artistic creation is understood as a participation in the divine act of creation, not necessarily within its religious context and connotation. Cinema, as Tarkovski aptly calls it, is a ‘sculpting in time’, creation of images in time, the continuation of a divine prerogative by the humans, to create reality in the divine image and likeness. Thus cinema could be said as most tangible meeting point for the humans, the meeting point of the divine-human yearning for creation. In the process of image-making the filmmaker meets his own creator (easily understood from a secular-spiritual angle), or better put the source of inspiration for his creative work which is beyond the work and
its physical parameters. But the creative process is not complete with the filmmaker’s creation of images—which itself involves multiple encounters—until the image meets its diverse beholders, the audiences, who also eventually partake in the creative process in their own right as well as in the personal search for truth and beauty that the filmmaker had embarked on at the outset. Cinema cannot be understood comprehensively if we fail to appreciate these various encounters at multiple levels and phases, meeting of the divine-human, creator-spectator, and content-form and so on. The art of cinema thus rightly deserves to be described as a celebration of transcendence and immanence enfleshed in time.

Naturally a discussion on cinema and spirituality or the secular-spiritual encounter in and through cinema turns its attention to the master filmmakers in World Cinema, who have made it possible for themselves and for their audience to witness the sacred-secular encounter through what we call as their masterpieces. Those films have become classics in world cinema not simply because of their great cinematic technique, but as revelations of transcendence that those films communicate beyond words and images, beyond the borders of the film screen. Andrei Tarkovski, Robert Bresson, Ozu, Akira Kurasawa, Ingmar Bergman, Krzysztof Kieślowski are the names that always come to mind first. These great artists were great human beings first and foremost. Perhaps, the external and internal conflicts that many of them had to face in life helped them carve out poetry from the raw human experiences.

Anvar Ali, poet and screenplay writer, proposes Tarkovski, who waged a solitary war against inhuman structures and autocratic political systems, as the best model for a study on cinema and spirituality.

Tarkovski presents before us kind of a manifesto that says spirituality is not easily definable because it is a mixture of sacred and secular and is complex. He held that spirituality is not a monopoly of the Church and theologians, it belongs to the materialists too, if not they all should war against the ‘hell’ that the established church creates and upholds. Tarkovski in one shot neutralises the overt-spiritual and overt-materialistic approaches. In a way his approach has some similarity with the spiritual approach of the great Malayalam poet Ezhuthachan, who was a proponent of devotion and action. Tarkovskian films contain a conceptual, imaginative energy that we can’t categorize into spiritual and material (Anvar Ali, contex.B-1970s to 90s).
Sanju Surendran, is an admirer of ‘spiritual’ or ‘transcendental’ cinema represented by Bresson, Ozu and others. After graduating from FTII in film direction, he has been closely associating with Mani Kaul, who along with Kumar Sahani, was instrumental in generating interest in personal, spiritual cinema in the Indian scenario. Surendran wishes to view spiritual cinema detached from the clutches of conventional religious structures and beliefs.

‘Spiritual’ in cinema would never come through religious themes; you can’t create ‘transcendental cinema’ through religious themes. In ‘Transcendental Cinema’, mainly three filmmakers are discussed: Ozu, Bresson and Dryer. In Ozu we experience the sense of Zen; nothing is said or shown explicitly, but his worldview is like that. He has made very simple films on family relationships. The other important filmmaker is Bresson. Deluzi had talked about these two filmmakers as the height of filmmaking (Sanju Surendran, context.C-1990s and beyond).

Anvar Ali contrasts Bergman’s Western Christian imagery with the background of Tarkovski, which is the Russian Orthodox tradition. He argues that our affinity for the Eastern spiritual traditions plays a role in preferring Tarkovski to Bergman:

There are many people in the East who don’t appreciate Bergman films that much, because they don’t easily understand the ‘guilt-ridden’ Christian religious/moral context in which Bergman moulds his stories and characters. It is Christian, European imagery, whereas Tarkovski’s imagery is central Asian, Russian, but with elements of European Christianity too; elements of dialectical materialism too intermingled in him. Though Bergman is a great master, one would have to say that it is Tarkovski who integrally viewed that historical juncture that he lived and presented it in his films (Anvar Ali, context. B).

Sanju Surendran clarifies how Bresson, in spite of being a staunch believer and practitioner of Christian religion, a rigid, orthodox form of Catholicism, his ‘spiritual cinema’ always went beyond the confines of that religion and at times even against normal expectations of its moral code:

Bresson followed a branch of Christianity called ‘Jansonian’; he believed in the concept of grace. His films never dealt directly with Christian themes, but explored the lives of robbers, pickpockets, prostitutes etc. He could discover spirituality in them. Grace could come upon a pickpocket or on a donkey. Spirituality is not a tangible experience; it percolates through the film (Sanju Surendran, context. C).
Tarkovski had great respect for Bresson. In ‘Sculpting in Time’, Tarkovski comments on Bresson’s insistence on perfection, attained through minimalism: “Bresson is perhaps the only man in the cinema to have achieved the perfect fusion of the finished work with a concept theoretically formulated beforehand” (Tarkovski 1987:95). Again, many contradicting elements or paradoxes embedded in the work of Bresson are what make his films interesting, aesthetically and spiritually. This is evident from the observations on Bresson by Jean-Pierre Pagliano:

Bresson’s cinema (tography) alloys every superlative imaginable with a number of paradoxes. It combines the most abstract with the most concrete, the most irritating and the most fascinating, the most experimental and the most classical, the most pure and the most perverse, the most wanton and the most necessary (Pagliano 1998: 13).

In an interview with Yvonne Baby, Bresson clarifies why he places ‘cinematography’ in opposition to cinema and goes on to describes his unique way of image creation:

Cinematography or cinematographic act is a manner of writing with images in movement and with sounds. It cannot be a spectacle, for a spectacle calls for a real presence, a presence in flesh and bones. Present day films cannot be anything more than photographic reproductions of a spectacle (theatre, music hall). The photographic reproduction of a sculpture or a painting does not ‘create’ that sculpture or painting. It creates nothing. If there is creation at all in these films, it falls within the realm of theatre, with the camera being used for reproduction (Baby 1998: 55).

In their yearning for the Infinity, in their search for the ‘ideal’, artists filmmakers go beyond logic and language and choose the medium of images hoping to communicate the non-communicable, says Tarkovski:

An image can be created and make itself felt. It may be accepted or rejected. But none of this can be understood in any cerebral sense. The idea of infinity cannot be expressed in words or even described, but it can be apprehended through art, which makes the infinity tangible. The absolute is only attainable through faith and in the creative art act (Tarkovski 1987: 38)

Taking his cue from Tarkovski, Sunny Joseph finds parallels in the creation of cinematic image and the divine act of creation, both being linked by the common element, Time:

Bible says ‘God is love’, I say ‘Cinema is love’. You may ask ‘Is cinema God?’ my answer is ‘may be’. Bible says ‘God created man in his own image and likeness’. That same process we can see in cinema, where ‘in his own
image’ man creates. So, this is the completion of a circle. God created man in his own image...man in his own image created cinema. Now, how are cinema and God connected? That connection lies in the understanding of Time....Cinema is the work carved out of time (Sunny Joseph, context. A).

What is the essence of a director’s work? Tarkovski poses this question:

We could define it as sculpting in time. Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of the features that is finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it—so the filmmaker, from a ‘lump of time’ made up of any enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image (Tarkovski 1987: 63).

Cinema, the art of `sculpting in time’ elevates human beings to the level of God, the creator, argues Sunny Joseph:

A famous physicist said, ‘Time is the quality of God’. Does time move forward? He says that Time doesn’t have an arrow of direction (backward/forward). Then how do you relate God with Time? He says, ‘Time is the quality of God’. If time is the quality of God, cinema is the supreme art form man has created so far, in celebration of time. That probably becomes the celebration of the Creator/God (Sunny Joseph, context A).

The creative process of image-making though begins in the innermost being of the filmmaker, the audiences are invited to partake in the creative agonies of the artist and respond to the same issues that he has been engaging with. “A film director”, says Tarkovski, begins to be an artist at the moment when, in his mind or even on film, his own distinctive system of images starts to take shape—his own pattern of thoughts about the external world—and the audience are invited to judge it, to share with the director in his most precious and secret dreams.” Only when his personal viewpoint in brought in, when he becomes a kind of philosopher, does he emerge as an artist, and cinema—as an art. A work becomes a masterpiece, when it touches many viewers in almost the same way it first ‘traumatised’ the artist:

Touched by a masterpiece, a person begins to hear in himself that same call of truth which prompted the artist to this creative act. When a link is established between the work and its beholder, the latter experiences a sublime, purging trauma. Within that aura which unites masterpieces and audiences, the best sides of our souls are made known, and we long for them to be freed. In those moments we recognize and discover ourselves, the unfathomable depths
of our own potential, and the furthest reaches of our emotions (Tarkovski 1987:43)

Anvar Ali shares his first experience of being ‘touched by a masterpiece’ and how that experience changed his whole perspective about cinema as an art and as different from other art forms, especially literature, which is his main arena of activity:

For me ‘Padre Padrone’ was the trigger factor to recognize cinema as an art for…..One scene I remember clearly from ‘Padre Padrone’ is a young man walking through a vast landscape, with a particular musical instrument; and its special colour scheme. The mood of the film was very spiritually elevating. I got ‘charged’ with that film, a light coming into us. I had got the same energy when I read novels of Dostoyevsky, getting insights about the world, about life etc. A difference I felt between novel and cinema is that I got the feeling ‘cinema is an integrated art’, the human condition, history, fables and legends all integrated, and also the feeling that cinema is beyond language (Anvar Ali, context.B-1970s to 90s).

Many others may get under the skin of a particular character/s in a film and empathize with the predicament of that character; they may even forget there is another person, the filmmaker, who had already gone through this cruciating experience of ‘living’ the life of others, his characters. Louis Mathew, film curator and teacher, shares how films have helped him connect to concrete life situations and enhanced understanding of him and others:

One reason for loving cinema so much in my life is that we can experience the experience of another person; if we experience everything that the character goes through as our own, then that gets stamped in our hearts. If someone screams at us in real life for no fault of ours, we may remember a similar scene from some films we had seen and assume that the person who is mad at us had a wrong/bad day. Cinema taught me to accept other human beings, however strange they might be and might behave. Cinema helps us to understand the complexity of life and of this world, that there is a black in the white and a white in the black’ (Louis Mathew, context B).

Louis Mathew further delves into the works of great masters and tries to go close to the compassionate understanding they had to all ‘types’ of characters, who were treated as human beings and not as heroes or villains, whom the society usually paints in permanent ‘black’ or ‘white’.

For humanist filmmakers like Ray, Krzysztof Kieślowski and others, the villain is the society or adverse circumstances/influences. In such films there
are no `evil characters’, but only human beings who fall into bad influences or adverse circumstances and do what they would never want to do. Any bad person has such a beautiful side to his/her character; there is no pure black or pure white. There is Truffaut in the same track...they are great filmmakers not just in their craft but for their love (compassion/understanding) for their characters and their commitment to the medium (Louis Mathew, context. B).

Jean-Marie G. Le Clezio reflects on the works of Bresson and how those films have proved to be masterpieces, presenting a vision through the characters, who are pitied against the callous society and its systems of judgement:

A trial lies at the heart of Bresson’s works. The trial, that crucial moment, when a lone man confronts the society, which judges him, excludes him, in the name of human justice, then consigns him to prison, or to the executioner. Like Joan of Arc and Lancelot, the accused hero of L’Argent, faces injustice and evil; his path takes him away from other men, marks him out as an expiatory victim. Human justice cannot take the exceptional into account, just as it cannot accommodate individual morality or mystic revelation

(Clezio 1998: 79)

Anwar Ali locates this experience of living at the extremes in the filmmakers themselves. Tarkovski, who, in addition to the intense mental torture he had to undergo being an `exile’ in one’s homeland in those days of Stalinist authoritarianism that did not entertain any individual expressions of faith and creativity, encountered the pangs of human-divine, saint-sinner conflicts and struggles each moment, like any of us.

Tarkovski is the best example of the fact that it is extremely difficult to be a true ideal sanyasi (ascetic) and true human being; in Tarkovski we find the struggles of this duo, sanyasi and the raw, emotional human being. His films evoke fear of this universe and human mortality at the same time...his films are very Russian to the core, for example `The Sacrifice’, but universal at the same time. His Russian experience is of the cold war years; some 20-30 years he spent in that situation, as a true thinker and intellectual (Anvar Ali, context.B-1970s to 90s).

The Polish filmmaker Kieślowski came from theatre to cinema and began addressing the ambiance of `under surveillance’ in his country imposed by Stalinist Russia. After making many documentaries and fiction features like `Camera Buff’ `Blind Chance’ and `No End’ he went on to make the mini television series `Decalogue’ based on the Ten Commandments in the Bible and eventually earned the remark `Filmmaker of
moral anxiety’ from critics. The very last films he made, ‘Three Colours; White, Blue, Red’, based on the three principles of French revolution, brought him out of his country and to international fame; but then he said he wanted to stop making films and return to theatre. For Louis Mathew and many others (including the researcher), Kieślowski comes up in discussions as the maestro who addressed spirituality/morality not as some fixed religious principles but as the predicament of individuals trapped in the contemporary life situations, making mistakes in judging right and wrong, virtue and sin, but still struggling to know the ultimate truth and goodness.

My favourite filmmaker is Kieslowski. He did ten films in nine months; then did three films in ten months. All films got awards….He did such great films in such a short span of time. And such a great filmmaker once said, “It is important to take the baby of the costume designer woman to school than starting the film shoot on time, because life is more important than cinema.” When we watch some part of the ‘Decalogue’ series, we will see the protagonist of another ‘Decalogue’ film standing in a lift etc. It only shows that the protagonist of one film could be a ‘secondary’ character in another film. Everybody is a hero and heroine in some film. No one is a ‘secondary’ character in all films forever. No one is unimportant (Louis Mathew).

Tarkovski comments on the role of cinema in addressing the complex issues of human existence as other art forms have been doing for centuries. Cinema, the unique art form of the 20th century (as Lenin had declared), is equipped to realise the secular-spiritual pursuit of the artists and audiences in a unique way, provided they both understand and utilize the unique potential of cinema as an art.

Cinema should be a means of exploring the most complex problems of our times, as vital as those which for centuries have been the subject of literature, music and painting. It is only a question of searching, each time searching out afresh the path, the channel, to be followed by cinema. I am convinced that for anyone of us our filmmaking will turn out to be a fruitless and hopeless affair if we fail to grasp precisely and unequivocally the specific character of cinema, and if we fail to find ourselves our own key to it (Tarkovski 1987: 80).

6.4 Immanence-Transcendence in Malayalam Cinema

We listened to the great filmmakers in World Cinema talking about their search for truth and how they give expressions to it in their creative process and how much they hope their audiences to partake in these processes. We also listened to selected
accounts of some viewers on how the great cinematic geniuses work on our spirit and elevate our humanity to divinity through the kind of inner purification that only works of art can do. Then, a very spontaneous concern or interest that pops up in the minds of people in Kerala is how far this secular-spiritual blend is achieved in Malayalam cinema. Do we have such great films that reveal the sublime in humans, films that without extolling religious or spiritual tenets or movements, appeal to us emotionally and intellectually and leave us with the desire to seek more, to know more and to love more? How do our filmmakers, of all streams of cinema, attempt to address the `big questions’ in life? Do the filmmakers and viewers get to understand the realities of life better through the cinematic experience? Are these experiences connected to some philosophies of life that they may share in common?

Andrei Tarkovski tells filmmakers not to turn their films into a mere ensemble of techniques and spectacles, but to bring out each work of art from the profoundness of thought and experiences so that their viewers can leave the movie halls with a feeling of fullness.

If a skilled craftsman uses highly developed modern means to speak of some subject which does not touch him personally, and if he has a certain taste, he can for a time take his audiences in. However, the ephemeral nature of his film will be clear soon enough; sooner or later time inexorably shows up the hollowness of any work that is less than the expressions of unique, personal world view (Tarkovski 1987: 103).

K. P. Kumaran, filmmaker, feels that in India and especially in Kerala rarely do we witness masterpieces that blend our philosophical and cultural traditions.

After Tagore, we didn’t have many writers who tried to incorporate their philosophy into their writing. In Malayalam, may be one Kumaran Asan, then recently one O.V.Vijayan (to some extent) tried to blend their philosophy of life with their creative work. It might be the limitations of our life contexts, education etc. that our artists/filmmakers don’t address fundamental questions of life and do it like visionaries….on my part, I wish at least to ‘prepare the way’ for such visionaries who are yet to come! (Kumaran, context.A-1970s)

Sara Joseph, who has contributed many commendable works of literature based on texts like Ramayana and on local-specific religious and cultural traditions, feels that it is the lack of profound experience that deter artists in Kerala from anchoring their works in philosophical or metaphysical reflections.
For the Europeans and even the Russians, they had to face and always address unrest, wars, and many controversies or disputes. For us, Malayalees, we didn’t even have an experience of war. There is this also general tendency of Indians to leave aside all philosophical burdens out of day-to-day life. They can either think of everything as ‘karma’ or take everything as ‘maya’. There is a big difference in reading Ramayana of Ezhuthachan and that of Valmiki, the latter having a tumultuous atmosphere. We see Raman lamenting about the abduction of Sita (‘mama tharuni Sita’). Then the next moment we hear Raman or someone else saying that it was ‘maya Sita’ that was stolen and not the actual Sita. This is to safeguard the ‘purity’ of the royal wife ‘Sita’ (also to safeguard the dignity of Rama)....Once the maya Sita is presented, Rama stops crying (Sara Joseph, context.A-1970s).

When we turn our ears to some filmmakers in Malayalam cinema, matured and budding ones, we do find artists with a difference among them, who are swimming against the current or at least trying to, in spite of their success or failures in their career. Shaji. N. Karun, who translated the magnificent cinematic vision of G. Aravindan on to celluloid with his adept cinematography and later proved himself as a master filmmaker through his début Piravi and subsequent works of art shares his convictions:

I take time and wait before all my film projects. I try to retain that element of spirituality in all my films. I am not looking for what benefits people get from this life; am more concerned about how a film could guide people to goodness. Spirituality is a road map for our destiny, in whatever way one may want to shape it. Spirituality gives purpose to our life (Shaji N. Karun, context. A)

Sanju Surendran, is ‘consumed’ by the yearnings of doing his first full length film. He graduated from FTII recently and has been dreaming to create a cinematic idiom of his own; but he already had some ‘bitter-sweet’ experiences from his first encounters with the Malayalam film industry. Surendran tells us how sacred cinematic experience could inspire the filmmaker and viewer as well.

Cinema is a very religious/spiritual art. It requires the same disposition of a religious ritual (like going on to the altar). But in the current Indian/Kerala scenario a spiritual cinema is very less probable.... spirituality is a process of self–discovery. That way I find the films of Bunuel as spiritual. Even an atheist can become spiritual in his creative work (Sanju Surendran, context.C).

K.R. Mohanan, a filmmaker from the 1970s with leftist leanings, so far has not felt the need of addressing the faith dimension. He observes many others like him who do not
link their creative work to a depth dimension. In general, Mohanan feels that Keralites are dealing with issues in life at a peripheral level.

I am not an agnostic, but at the same time I don’t have any particular religious faith as the basis of my life....right now or so far I haven’t felt the need to introspect my faith, because the subjects that I have dealt with so far haven’t demanded such an introspection. When it comes, I may ask the fundamental philosophical questions, I don’t know. I don’t have any fundamental conflicts like Tarkovski. I don’t think the Leftist thinkers, writers and artists in Kerala have conflicts like Tarkovski or even like Bergman....so faith doesn’t figure much in our films. Our conflicts might be on a peripheral level and so we address such issues only at peripheral level....It also depends on the freedom that we enjoy in order to practice our religions in Kerala; this is nowhere near the ’East European’ situation at the time of Stalin (K.R. Mohanan, context. A).

Bina Paul has worked as editor with many filmmakers from the 1980s onwards and continues to work in the 2000s and also keeps herself updated on world cinema as Artistic Director of the International Film Festival of Kerala-IFFK. From her experience she feels, ’Malayalee personal life is almost like double standards; an intellectual pretension.’ Since these attitudes reflect in our filmmakers’ approach to the art of cinema, Bina feels that though we churn out a good amount of films every year, most of them only serve as a means of commercial revenue. ‘One great artist that we had as an exception was G.Arvindan’, says Bina, ‘for whom cinema served primarily as a medium for his artistic pursuit and spiritual search’.

No artist can escape that journey of personal encounter with the ‘unknown’/the ‘beyond’; the spiritual journey. It may lead you to religion, or to a different path, say religionless spirituality. But that journey is inevitable for humans. You don’t see this in our films at all. Why? Because cinema is commerce here; ….you don’t have artists in our Malayalam cinema. An artist surely goes through this journey. Therefore for me Arvindan is ‘The artist’ of Malayalam cinema. Cinema was just a medium for him; you see this search in his works, these questions, confusions and that’s why he is very important. He is one of the few artists of Malayalam cinema. I don’t know how he would have gone on if he were alive today; in his early works at least, this spiritual journey is very evident (Bina Paul, context.B-1970s to 90s).

6.5 The Secular-Spiritual in the cinema of G. Aravindan

‘The Seer who walked Alone’: This is the title of a documentary film that G. Aravindan made on Jiddhu Krishnamurthy, the thinker and writer. When we look back at the life and artistic pursuit of G. Aravindan, we feel it only apt to describe
Aravindan as `A seer who walked alone’. On a vertical plane he always sought after a distinct philosophical and artistic vision. And on the horizontal level his life was always a communion, life spent in the company of friends, fellow artists, ordinary people, celebrated with music, sketches, illustrations, cartoons, and lighter moments of `vedivattam’ (time pass). His was a life spent in the communion of `small humans’ in the `Big world’. A detailed discussion on the vision and art of Aravindan fits in well as the best avenue in Malayalam cinema for a study of the secular-spiritual encounter in art. Such an inquiry also help us explore if similar pursuits still appear in the works of other filmmakers in Malayalam, and to imagine possible expressions or re-articulations of the secular-spiritual in our cinema in future.

K.P. Kumaran, himself a great filmmaker, has also worked with other filmmakers from 1970s onwards, including Aravindan. Many of them initially had associated with the Chitralekha film society and in the production work of the film Swayamvaram. Kumaran considers Aravindan as a holistic person and artist.

Among the filmmakers of `new Malayalam Cinema’ if at all anyone can claim to be connected to our traditions, to world cinema/art and also to the pulses of the day-today socio-political life of masses in Kerala, it was G. Aravindan…He used to relate to many people in different strata, even if their viewpoints were different from his own (Kumaran, context. A).

Sunny Joseph, cinematographer of Vasthuvara, the very last film of Aravindan, in the ‘Introductory Note to the ‘G. Aravindan Memorial Lecture’ at the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK-2008), shares his admiration towards Aravindan as an artist and human being of great compassion.

G. Aravindan lived his life and created his multi-faceted work of art based on the principles of love and sacrifice. He once said, “If there is any aim for art it is to create a compassionate and strong humanity”….from Uttarayanam to Vasthuvara, all his films made us remember the need for a compassionate and strong humanity. Like any other great artists, G. Aravindan’s film also spoke to us about the absence of a loving and compassionate society, and the need for love ( Sunny Joseph, IFFK 2008).

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65 ‘Small humans and the Big world’ was the title of a cartoon strip series that Aravindan did for Mathrubhoomi weekly and this has entertained and enlightened a couple of generations in Kerala from early 1960s onwards.
The present study does not intend to analyse all films of Aravindan, from *Uttarayanam* to *Vasthuhara*, in detail. What we are interested and would be able to do within our scope is to examine the salient features of Aravindan’s works, mainly as perceptions, memories and critical comments of different people. We also intend to look closely at one of his eleven fiction features, *Esthappan*, in an attempt to go as close as possible to the ‘soul of Aravindan’ and also the ‘soul of cinema’ that Aravindan had sought and found in his own way. We choose to reflect on the politics of Aravindan, his spirituality and his creative process as three important aspects that would enrich our study of the secular-spiritual. We single out the film *Esthappan*, the film that Aravindan has admitted as his favourite film, for this brief study.

### 6.5.1 small humans and the Big World: The politics of Aravindan

We cannot demarcate boundaries in Aravindan’s vision, politics, spirituality and creative process. But we could gather the identifiable elements and patterns in his personality and in his art under such categories for the practical purpose of handling the apparently ‘abstract’ material with some clarity. For example, some of his ardent fans and some critics may take issue with the title ‘politics of Aravindan’. They might say that Aravindan did not make any ‘political cinema’ and he did not endorse any particular political thought in his films; they are right. But, the basic premise of this research has made it very clear at the very outset: every film is political, every film has its politics and with this premise we proceed to discuss the ‘politics of Aravindan’. The truth is that only a detailed thematic study of all Aravindan’s films could hope to understand in depth and breadth the spirit of Aravindan’s vision and/or politics. Refusing to be contained in the study of the themes plot and characterisation, the vision of Aravindan extends to his unique visual treatment, sound and music design and moreover to his very concept and practice of filmmaking as a ‘collective’ creative process of ‘communion’.

Many critics (Wood 2009) and viewers consider Aravindan’s vision as ‘enigmatic’, involving a deep awareness of the ‘irrational’ in the portrayal of his themes and characters. This is true to a great extent, but it does not seem that he deliberately tried to be enigmatic or irrational. I would argue that it was his attempt to address ‘absence’
and make it present through image and sound that made Aravindan’s films ‘abstract’. As he conceived the character of Sita in *Kanchana Sita* as ‘absent’ on the screen, but present as the *prakriti*, the (mother) Nature, this ‘absence-presence’ and the ‘irrational-rational’ flows spontaneously from his vision that was grounded in a search for the secular-spiritual. At a time when the scientific rational jargons of modernity and the Marxist-socialist politics held the sway in the cultural politics of Kerala if Aravindan could pursue the secular-spiritual as a ‘seer who walked alone’, it shows that he had a clear politics, which perhaps was not fully articulated in a language familiar to the majority, since he was addressing the enigmatic. At a time when the feminist movement was still in its nascent stage in the Kerala, Aravindan could address the ‘absence’ of Sita and generate discussions on the ‘absent Sita’ than on the omnipresent Rama, taking the liberty of liberating mythological/sacred text from its male-centred and man-centred preoccupations and re-read it from a feminine/eco-feminine perspective. That unquenchable quest in him for the ‘absent-present’ clearly underscores his ‘politics’. From his first film *Uttarayanam* to his last *Vasthuhrara*, his concern and compassion for people at the periphery, the ‘dispossessed’, become evident in his characterisation and the ‘pain of helplessness and yearning’ that he fills the spectators’ hearts with. The empathy with which he treats his characters and the way he brings them, who are otherwise ‘absent’ or ‘invisible’ in the mainstream of the society, to the ‘centre’ of the film narrative, to the foreground, underscores his politics, vision and his ‘commitment’, a term very close to the heart of the ‘political cinema of the 1970s.

If there is a phrase that could summarise the politics and/or vision of Aravindan, it is the title of a cartoon strip he had created for *Mathrubhoomi* weekly, *cheriya manushyarum valiya lokavum* (Small humans and the Big world) and went to print regularly since the early 1960s. Reviewing Aravindan films in ‘The Cinemas of India’, Yves Thoraval refers to the politics of Aravindan ingrained in the cartoon series:

> Humour and significance characterised this series *The Little Men and A Big World* (his translation) through the tribulations of ‘Ramu’, a young middle class man, idealistic and romantic, who takes life too seriously,…Some ideas that he (Aravindan) had developed there—a fierce social criticism, nostalgia
for private life, a keen sense of individualism—have gone into the making of his subsequent cinematographic work (Thoraval 2000: 401).

John Wood comments on the way that Aravindan treats those ‘small men/humans’ in his films pitted against the big world, his characters, who in most cases are lonely, rejected and marginalised. They defy the logical scheme of any given society and its moral and social structures and strictures:

The thematics of Arvindan’s films evolve out of an acute awareness of the irrational. His characters are less than logical in the respect they pay to their own ideals and values or in their interpretation of whatever might be the will of the gods….characters who most readily claim his interest are the marginalised, the rejected, the lonely and the eccentric. Although we might relish the elements of optimism in Kummaty, and somewhat differently in Esthappan, we must also admit that there is a pervasive sadness in Aravindan’s films. From Uttarayanam, with its portrayal of soured dreams and rusted idealism, through to Vasthuhara, with its recognition of the continuing reality of rootlessness, the salient features of all Aravindan’s works are pity and a warm compassion for the hapless and the disadvantaged (Wood 2008: 291).

Sunny Joseph responds to those critics and viewers who find Aravindan’s films not ‘beautiful enough’ or ‘pleasant’ or ‘optimistic’. Quoting Dostoyevsky, “Beauty will save the world”, Sunny argues that in order to experience the beauty of Aravindan’s films or of any other profound artistic and human experiences, the beholder should try to get a share of that profound experience and the agony of the artist and of his characters:

How can the images of fleeing refugees from a war in Vasthuhara be termed as beautiful? How can the agony written in the faces of two great artists – Gopi and Smitha Pattil in the climax sequence of Chidambaram be termed as beautiful? How can be the dispossessed wailings of a displaced humanity in the end of Vasthuhara be termed as beautiful? This essence of beauty lies in the final moments of the experience of that work of art. At that moment of absolution a work of art reveals the beauty of creation and becomes a “Mirror of Love” like the “Mirror” of Sri Narayana Guru (Sunny Joseph, IFFK 2008).

Talking about the politics of Aravindans’ films, one should be careful not to connect his politics to an explicit political activity or activism. In presenting his empathetic understanding of and concern for the dispossessed and the ‘invisible’ sections of the society in films, his intention was to influence the individual and collective
consciousness, to change minds, and not socio-political structures, as he clarifies in an interview:

No work of art directly or indirectly changes society or human beings. However, cinema has the power to influence the human mind. Talking about good cinema, I believe that any act of a human being committed with sincerity and conviction is good. So is the case with cinema, if it is born out of one’s conviction, it cannot be but good (Chandrahasan: 1992).

This comes very close to the thinking of Tarkovski. He writes in `Sculpting in Time’ that what the artist could do is to express his vision of the world through his creative work and such artistic expression can engage with the audiences in different ways, but a work of art cannot ‘convert’ its beholder.

It is obvious that art cannot teach anyone anything, since in four thousand years humanity has learnt nothing at all. We should long ago have become angels had we been capable of paying attention to the experience of art, and allowing ourselves to be changed in accordance with the ideas it expresses (Tarkovski 1987: 50)

Sunny Joseph’s vivid memories of images and an important quote from Aravindan’s first film Uttaraayanan complements to Aravindan’s stand on politics of an artist:

I was always attracted to the cinema of Aravindan from the day I saw Uttaraayanan. I still remember the image of the dead face of the father with crawling ants. I still remember the dialogue from the film “Asking questions is more important than finding answers” (Sunny Joseph, context A).

Sara Joseph recognizes a very bold political stand in Aravindan films, which consists in raising discomfiting questions that challenge age-old social-religious traditions and structures controlled by patriarchy. She says that in the contemporary Kerala society, a discussion on ‘political cinema’ cannot ignore a film like Kanchana Sita. With the advent of eco-feminist positions, a re-reading of Kanchana Sita has become necessary. She insists that Kanchana Sita demands a different slot and not where historically we placed it, as ‘parallel cinema/art cinema’ etc. It was a distinctly ‘political film’.

It was a film that for the first time attempted a re-reading of Ramayana. Sita as the symbol of Nature was first presented in that film (we always knew Sita as the symbol of fertility/’she is ‘bhoomikanya’). Sita is mud/Earth, and Sita for Rama shouldn’t be someone to be burned in fire; if burned she would sprout
out with all strength….The `agnipravesha’ of Sita is simply this process in Nature and not a religious/moral ritual of punishment, where the female has to prove her fidelity and integrity in front of the male/patriarchal court. To give new life is possible only for the Earth and that’s the reason why the Earth is split open to take Sita in. She returns to where she came, because Sita is/was not just the wife of Rama, not just an individual, not a queen, not just a woman, but Sita is ‘Mother Earth’. How can you put the Mother Earth to a test of fire? (Sara Joseph, context.A).

Rajiv Vijayaragahvan, who has assisted Aravindan in direction and production of many of his films, proudly talks about the ‘tribute’ he paid in his début film Maargam to his guru Aravindan, reminiscing the maestro’s passion for seeking the ‘absent-present in the prakriti-purusha encounter, a concept very dear to the Indian philosophical and aesthetical imaginations:

(In Maargam), the name of the daughter is suggested to be “Prakriti”. That name is never used in the film as such, no one calling her by that name or anything, though we had tried to evoke the feeling and idea of Prakriti in some scenes. Especially in the scene in Wyanad forests while the father--excited to be in his old ‘revolutionary’ surroundings--misses her for a moment. When he looks back he can’t find her, but only the pristine nature. And, there in the music track we used the same raga used in  Kanchana Sita with bit variations. It’s a tribute to G. Aravindan (Rajiv Vijayaragavan, context. A)

6.5. 2 Cosmic Communion: The Spirituality of Aravindan

Many viewers have begun to read the spirituality of Aravindan films in ways that perhaps he himself had not imagined; that only shows the flexibility of the thematic and narrative structures of his films, open to myriad interpretations. The elements in Kanchana Sita and some other films of Aravindan contain immense potential for feminine-spiritual and eco-spiritual readings. But we still find the hangover and traces of the conventional, male-centred spirituality perspectives like `devaluing of the present life/moment and renunciation of this world’ in Aravindan himself and also in peoples’ (read men’s, including the researcher) spontaneous ‘admiration’ for `seeking the unknown’.

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66 I am referring to Aravindan’s response to the question in the Chandrakasan interview on ‘mundane-spiritual’ realm in his films. Aravindan traces the foundations of his spirituality in his desire for sanyasa in his youthful days, the desire to leave home.
Contrasted with an earthly, secular-spirituality that beautifully blends the feminine-masculine, the prakriti-purusha, the private (home) and the public (politics, society), the conventional spirituality is still conceived in terms of renunciation of the ‘earthly’ (read ‘feminine’). In conventional spiritualities, there is usually a preference for the transcendental over the immanent, a ‘superior/inferior’ distinction or demarcation. In Indian thought, the height of spiritual pursuit is seen in ‘sanyasa’ (asceticism), which a male has to embrace after giving up the ‘grihasta’ (domestic) and leaving his wife and children behind (in their ‘inferior’, ‘earthly’ pursuits). The story from the West, with its guilt-ridden morality and ‘escape to the mountains’ as the way to ensure one’s own salvation is not in any way different. It is a model of morality that places the burden of sin on the ‘woman and the serpent’ and so finds the ‘feminine’ as a threat to the spiritual pursuit of the male and vice versa, the ‘masculine as threat’ to the female spiritual seeker.

In Aravindan, the ‘feminine’, has very significant role in espousing his secular-spirituality that works as the undercurrent of many of his films. Though Kanchana Sita is the only film, where the title implies the centrality of the feminine in the narrative, his other films directly or indirectly highlight the joys and pains of womanhood/womanliness (in Chidambaram, again an instance of purusha-prakriti spiritual encounter at the end) and motherhood (in Pokuveil and Kummatty) and a ‘the uprooted returning to/seeking communion with the mother nature/land’ (Thampu, Esthappan and Vasthuhara). Unfortunately discussions on Aravindan’s spirituality so far have failed to acknowledge the significance of the feminine spiritual energy in the holistic secular-spiritual scheme of his films and people tend to seek only the ‘seeker of the Beyond’ in Aravindan.

Interestingly, Aravindan never gave any straight or clearly articulated answers to questions about his spirituality, political vision, his creative process and so on. The end sequence of Uttarayanam, shows the protagonist Ravi retreating to the forest, meets with an old, rustic woman and enchanted by her guileless laughter and her kindness, burns his mask in fire. Referring to the retreat of Ravi abandoning the revolutionary politics that his mentors (‘Mash’) and himself pursued, an interviewer
commented: `This search for the inviolable and eternal by the individual in the essences of Nature seems to be at the core of your films. There seems to be continuity in the search for the spiritual in the realms of the ordinary and mundane.' Aravindan’s response confirms his personal and artistic interest in a spiritual pursuit but not in its conscious and concrete articulations in films:

I have not done anything consciously. How it appears like that in the film; I don’t know. I was interested in the kind of issues you are talking about quite early in life. Though not very seriously, like a lot of youngsters, I thought of becoming a Sanyasi. Perhaps I could have. There were possibilities...


Yves Thoraval, borrows the description of Aravindan as a `philosopher-poet of the Seventh Art' that he heard from others, and observes that the meditative dimension of his works that earned him this epithet, gets renewed thematically each time, in the course of a solitary career (emphasis mine).67

His films are pervaded by a `spiritualistic’ visual lyricism rooted in the Indian religious traditions—the author declared that he was not an atheist, he believed ‘concretely’ in supernatural powers and in a mysticism which might be described as ‘pantheistic’—and his humanistic vision, which is sometimes enigmatic, ‘abstract’ and austere—is uncompromising. The filmmaker clings to the inner world of beings (Thoraval 2000: 401).

Janaki has always found Aravindan with a unique cinematic vision, grounded in the communion with all living beings, extending beyond man-made boundaries:

I haven’t studied his films in depth; but I like his films. There is a non-conventional seeking in Aravindan’s films. He goes beyond or away from the trend of the 70s on a different path. The critics unfortunately talk about Aravindan clubbing him to the filmmakers of the 70s and his films belonging to the `period’. I always experience a different communication in his films which is beyond the material or physical realms. It is a communication between humans and nature; especially in the film Esthappan, which conveys a cosmic vision. That vision is not man-centred and his films do not come from the human society alone; it is from the `non-human world’ too. You can’t simply use a lose term like ‘Nature’; it is something more. In his films we find a kinship with animals, rivers and the whole cosmos (Janaki, context. B).

67 Such descriptions of Aravindan only help to perpetuate the `aura’ around him manufactured by the media, and go contrary to the accounts of people who have actually worked with him, who have found him a very sociable and community-oriented person, without pretentions (those comments are added elsewhere).
V.G. Thampy locates the significance of the spiritual search in Aravindan films in the 1970s period itself, but he laments that such a distinct stream of pursuit in art was ignored in those days because of the predominant Leftist politics in Kerala that pushed other life styles and thinking to the sidelines. He holds the search for identity and meaning in Aravindan films close to his heart as a memoir of his own 70s.

May be because of Kerala’s special political climate and Leftist leaning, Aravindan was not read properly from the deep spiritual dimensions. In his very first film, Uttarayanam, the protagonist is searching himself and for answers, confronted with an identity crisis and social dilemmas, also seeking cultural identity. He finally comes near an old woman, ‘a lovely, beaming granny’, where he kind of finds himself, happiness and perhaps ‘emptiness’ of what he has been doing so far. The film thus ends in a moment of self-realization. We see a representation of the 70s in that protagonist and his search (Thampy, context A).

Sunny Joseph gives a testimony of how the vision of Aravindan, spiritual and compassionate, has influenced his own spirituality. This happened more through knowing Aravindan, the man and the artist, by working closely with him as cinematographer in his last film Vasthuhara and his documentaries. This note also throws light on the ‘huge company of artists/friends’ of Aravindan with whom he worked as one family and turned filmmaking into a celebration:

At a personal level Aravindettan is the one who taught me the meaning of true spirituality. He, through his life and creations, showed me the interconnectedness of all things. He showed me the interconnectedness of man to man and man to nature. Observing his life I too learned how to be compassionate and loving, towards fellow human beings. His cinema taught me to be big-hearted among humans with tiny souls.

6.5.3 Aravindan’s creative process

The element of irrationality and accidental coincidence that are at the root of Aravindan’s secular-spiritual vision gets reflected in his creative process too. His spirit could not reconcile with a clear, fixed idea of perfection, beauty and truth, because he was an unstoppable seeker, who experimented with different ‘versions’ as his cameramen and sound designers have observed. He was not an auteur who sought his ‘perfect/ideal’ film all alone. His creative process always happened in a big group of
friends, of small men with different talents and capacities but with one mind. In that circle of friends, Aravindan never felt the need to be the author at the centre.

Aravindan inherited a taste for experimentation and improvisation perhaps from other branches of arts that he was either trained in or associated with. He had studied South India Carnatic music as well as the Hindustani music of the North. His friends remember his love for Rabindra sangeet and his vast knowledge in musical traditions that later he used for composing music for films, his own and of others. His association with eminent theatre figures like CN Sreekantan Nair and Kavalam Narayanan Panikar got him involved in landmark play productions like Kanchana Sita and Avanavan Kadamba. Aravindan was part of a group of modernist artists based in Kozhikode, represented particularly by artist Devan, playwright Thikkodiyan and writer Pattathuvila Karunakaran. His entry into filmmaking was a sheer accident as he admits in an interview. He agreed to direct his first film Uttarayanam only because his friends, Pattahuvila Karunakaren (producer), Thikkodiyan (script-writer) and others insisted that he should direct it.

Yves Thoraval notes that it was a remarkable process of self-training in cinematographic techniques and additional exposure to world cinema through international film festivals and film club activities that brought the filmmaker in Aravindan to light. He had closely associated himself with Chitralekha, the film production collective and film society at Trivandrum. He himself had founded two film societies at Kottayam, where he hailed from. His free and spontaneous visual imagination that he had developed through his cartoon and caricature projects and his humility to learn from life and form the fellow artist than text books reflect in his responses to questions on his working style:

Most of the time I work with a loosely knit shooting script. Several times a lot of changes are made and some shots are totally abandoned. My scripts usually have the flexibility to take care of such eventualities. I don’t have pre-fixed frame….I am afraid of a pre-conceived frame and doubt its advantage….The shots can become rigid and the composition very formalistic. I feel a flexible approach in these matters bring better results. (Chandrahasan: Interview with Aravindan)
With the clarity and depth of his vision and a ‘loosely knit’ mental framework Aravindan set out to work on his films, always, incorporating ideas and suggestions from his team or anyone, thus experimenting with the film form in each new project as Sunny Joseph recollects:

From his first film Uttarayanam (1974) to his last film Vastuhara (1990), Aravindan kept changing his cinematic forms consistently during his film career spanning almost fifteen years. Aravindan successfully went beyond the limits and styles of filmmaking created by the new wave filmmakers of that time. This journey towards new facets of narrative included current incidents, history, myths and traditional stories (Sunny Joseph, 2008).

Krishnaunni, the sound designer and engineer, shares his experience of working with Aravindan, commenting on the tentativeness and on-going experimentation, which was typical of Aravindan’s working style.

If someone gives a suggestion, he would never say ‘no’, but would say ‘let’s try it out’. At the time of sound mixing, he would experiment with different feels; this experimentation and consultation and incorporation of suggestions was integral part of Aravindan’s life. He had a big group of friends who got involved in his creative process; in life too he always moved in a big circle of friends (Krishnanunni, context. B, 1970s to 90s).

Perhaps this spirit of collective creativity and experimentation were part of the general attitudes towards cinema those days, as an artistic pursuit than a spectacle put together with new techniques and technologies. Also in the 1970s-80s, artistes, technicians and a big group of ‘well wishers’ and film-lovers were ready to work together for a collective goal, putting aside selfish and commercial interests. Shaji. N. Karun, who worked as the cinematographer for almost all Aravindan films and later became a renowned filmmaker himself, attests to the collective creativity and team work those days and especially in all productions of Aravindan.

Those days there was kootayma (fellowship) of artists, writers, filmmakers and all: Ramu Kariattu, P. Bhaskaran, Aravindan, MT and others. The film work was not conducted at an individual level. Everyone helped one another in the craft of the filmmaking. There was no selfishness and also they all gave priority to the work/product than what income they got from it. This ambience was there in theatre, literature and journalism. Another good thing was that those films (of Aravindan etc) were discussed and debated well in our society (Shaji N. Karun, context.A, 1970s).
K.G. Jayan, cinematographer, has assisted Shaji N.Karun in some of Aravindan’s films as assistant cameraman; in many other films even when he did not have assignment in the camera unit, Aravindan would ‘force’ him to join the ever-growing production unit. Jayan cherishes those experiences as distinctly different from the filmmaking process today:

The beauty of working with him was that he never acted like he was ‘directing’ the film; we always felt that he was only at the centre of that multi-layered friendship circle; he didn’t try to control it. Cinema was almost like the by-product of the happiness that we all shared collectively. He couldn’t have created the film without this collective process, he always insisted that we all should be there in the process; that way it was ‘our ‗process and project, and not just his ‗work’….he was always ‘among his friends’ and there he created his films. That was his greatness. If you ask me if he was a great filmmaker or a friend for me, I would readily say he was a friend. The media promoted his image as ‘bujee’ (pretentious intellectual), away from people. It might be because he didn’t like to speak in public, didn’t make statements for media. He didn’t know it…..in the friends’ circle he always cracked jokes….If you read ‘cheriya manushyarum valiya lokavum’ there is sarcasm, humour and all; it comes from and takes you to a higher level. His humour comes from the way he looks at life (Jayan, context A).

Sunny Joseph’s comments on Aravindan’s work takes us to the essence of his cinematic imagination and vision of life, both replenished frequently from his profound simplicity:

His cinematic genius lies in the power of simplicity. Like a Zen monk he is a master of the principle of ‘MINIMUM’. His cinema always tried to chisel out the inessentials. Like a haiku poem his cinema revealed the true essence of nature and people. It is a paradox that we tend to forget that the long lasting creations of human civilizations like pyramids are made from the art of simplicity (Sunny Joseph)

Sunny Joseph refers to a paper cutting that Aravindan passed on to him one day on the way to a film shoot; it was an interview with Vilmos Zigmond, one of the finest cameraman of Hollywood. Sunny believes that a line from Zigmond became the guiding principle of cinematography for him, where Zigmond says, “No image can be more beautiful than its meaning.” This could very well be said as the gist of Aravindan’s cinema; his concept of beauty flowed from his concept of truth and love, which is ingrained in all his films, in his music compositions and in his cartoon series ‘small men and the big world’. We now move on to take a closer look at one of
Aravindan’s films, *Esthappan*, in view of understanding how this ‘philosopher-poet of the seventh art’ translated truth, love and beauty, in one word the essence of the secular-spiritual pursuit, into concrete images and sounds imprinted on the screen and on human minds.

6.5.4. *Esthappan-in two/many worlds: Review and Discussion*

**Plot Summary:** Esthappan, a fisherman lives in a seashore colony of fishermen. To the fisherfolk of the coastal Christian village, he is at once an eccentric simpleton, a possessed soothsayer and faith healer, a satanic grave stealer and many more. Esthappan’s story unfolds through narrations of other fishermen about the miracles supposedly performed by him and the ‘controversial’ and ‘indecent’ incidents he gets involved. There are people, who understand him to certain extent and loves/respects him and his powers and there are others, especially some men, who does not like him, consider him as a cheat and scheming to get rid of him. Perhaps one section of the society that enjoys his presence and powers is the children in the village; to them he speaks in verses at times, draw sketches for them, play tricks and all. There occur certain incidents that are testimonials to his ‘healing’ and ‘miraculous’ powers and capacity for ‘premonitions and predictions’. Esthappan ‘appears’ from ‘nowhere’ (does not have a beginning) and disappears to ‘anywhere’ that people have no clue to the extent that his character raises strong apprehensions regarding his ‘reality’. Is he only a myth or is he real human with flesh and blood? This feeling rises to the maximum towards the end when all on a sudden he is not see anywhere and no one had any clue. There is a *chavittunattakam* at the end of the film, which is a Easter-Mistery play as per the tradition of the Christian fisher people. The play takes us to the very end of the film, where Esthappan is right there and nothing ends, especially the mystery about Esthappan, only ‘begins’ now.

“No image can be more beautiful than its meaning” says Vilmos Zigmond. But what if an image conveys more than one meaning? And each beholder comes up with contesting meanings and claims and counter claims to right and wrong? It may cease to be an art and end up as cacophony. But if, artists and audiences deem multiple meanings as multiple doorways to the hall of multiple mirrors? Cinema, is that magical hall of multiple mirrors, of images, sounds and multiple meanings from multiple angles, multiplied by multiple audiences different and diverse because of their age, colour, creed, gender et al: this could sound like a child play or a hard-core puzzle. A film like *Esthappan* takes us to that complex track where we can either get caught up between myth and reality, good and bad, virtue and sin as per ‘what people
say’ or can open our inner and outer eyes and ears and all our senses and ‘behold the One’ while enjoying the play of ‘many’.

Yves Thoraval gives us some clue on entering the world of Esthappan or entering the world through Esthappan:

*Esthappan* is reality born from the look of others. In fact even his reality is a creation of his family circles, whose anecdotes and hearsay, often contradictory, portray him sometimes as an immortal prophet and maker of miracles or invested with a Christ-like redemptive dimension or else a charlatan or a crook, leaving the mystery intact (Thoraval 2000: 412).

John Wood in ‘Essential Mysteries’ writes about *Esthappan*, shedding light on the saint and sinner, ‘hidden under the skin’ of this Christ-like figure, Esthappan.

There are obvious Christ-like elements about Esthappan, but it would be a mistake to see the film as an allegory about a modern day Jesus. While Esthappan is laughed at he is not persecuted…his simple human feelings are all too obvious and yet he shines as a good if not virtuous person: selfless, quite without malice, gentle and kind. Perhaps it is indeed this essential humanity in which his eccentricity lies (Wood 2007: 274).

I. Shanmugadas, film critic who writes often on ‘cinema and spirituality’, picks *Esthappan* to talk about the spiritual search in Aravindan’s films. He says that this search may be indirect, but it is there in his visual treatment, in the silence and in his concerns revealed through the content of the films. Anvar Ali considers *Esthappan* as the most ‘personal film’ of Aravindan that doesn’t discuss politics directly.

In Kerala’s specific political context such ‘personal cinema’ is not very much entertained. Aravindan’s all other films has political tones, but not *Esthappan*, because it is told as a fairy tale, the story of a ‘avadoothan’, a messenger from God. In such films of Aravindan, ‘authorship is very less (Anvar Ali, context. B, 1970s-90s).

In the interview (Chandrahasan), Aravindan admits that the theme of *Esthappan* is the one he personally liked the most. The film grew out of the many stories that he had heard from different religions. Then a lot of his imagination went into it. There was no particular reason that the film has a Christian backdrop. However, the structure of the church, the seashore and the fisher folk together has given the film, Aravindan believes, a depth and meaning, which may not have been the case with some other backdrop.
Is Esthappan really an *avadoothan*, a messenger from another world or from God as some critics and viewers say, and not a real man with flesh and blood? Is he a myth or reality? Since in the film itself we see the reality of Esthappan being constructed through different stories that different people tell and people who have watched the film have different versions on who Esthappan really is, any other viewer can only have `another view’ of the film. Interestingly, each time the same viewer views *Esthappan*, another different view becomes possible from angles she/he had not thought of earlier. Surely, the filmmaker, Aravindan, would have had his own view/s on the character he had created, salient aspects of which we shall examine at the end. Even before we attempt to enter into the `reality’ of a filmic character, we get some sense that what different people call as reality in real life or in cinema, is only their own version of reality, each view/version is a new ‘text’ woven around or upon the author’s version or her/his (auteurial) text.

6.5.4.1 *Esthappan*– ‘Another View’/ Researcher’s remarks: When I watched *Esthappan* specifically for the purpose of this research, some questions came up in my mind: Where does he come from? Where does he go/disappear? Where does he live? Who is he? Such questions about Esthappan make this film interesting, as they present truths that baffle us and are beyond our full comprehension.

I felt this film has something in common with *Rashamon*, the film by Akira Kurasawa, where the filmmaker presents to us four versions of one and the same incident from four different points of view and at the end leave the responsibility to the audiences, of deciding the `absolute truth’ of the incident, if at all there exists such an absolute truth. Though people see or are able to see only a portion/corner of reality, they prefer to pretend that they know `everything’/ `The truth’. Thus people quickly pass judgements on others, especially on those whose appearance or behaviour challenges our normal rules of perception and interpretation.

The filmmaker seems to answer our (and his own) questions on Esthappan, at the beginning of the film and at the end of this film, but in poetic/figurative language. Esthappan enters from the sea and later disappears into nowhere, and again is right there before our eyes as if nothing had happened or as if time had not passed in
between. Esthappan makes up some verses (he speaks rarely, and all in verse) in order to solve the `riddle’ of the children who ask him if they would win the class tests. Through drawings and verses Esthappan clarifies some basic truths, perhaps that is one way of solving the `riddle of Esthappan’, about his reality, but that also offers some possibility of solving the riddle of the `Beyond’, the `one truth’ that people see as many. The film has suggestions that Esthappan is connected to the `Beyond’ and that is what makes the reality about him enigmatic and that is what endows him with `extra-natural’ faculties/powers, which he use always in the service of the needy, in quite ordinary, human ways without any aura, but the impact it creates in the beneficiaries and in most audiences (though I cannot speak for others) is a `reverence’ to this extraordinary figure with ‘miraculous’ powers.

One may call the Beyond ‘god’ or supernatural power or what one may wish. One possible definition of the Beyond is offered by Esthappan through his drawings and verses that share not with the `wise elders’, but with children: `Onnu ariyathavane onninum kollillalo….Onnum illathavanu thudakkamilla, odukkavumilla’ (the one who does not know is worth for nothing….the one who has nothing has neither beginning nor end). This is another way of saying what the Indian sages had said in the verse, `Poornamatha….poormenameva avashishyate’ (you take fullness out of fullness and fullness remains), that is the `Infinity’, the `Beyond’, the `Sacred’. Tagore wrote in `Gitanjali’: `Let me not lose sight of the One in the play of many’. Reality is one but it appears as many, if we agree to what the Indian sages had said in the verse, `ekam sat vipraha, bahuta vdanti’ (Reality is one, the sages see it as many)

Esthappan, though human like any others, shares this quality of the Divine, of having everything but nothing at the same time, of being and `non-being’ at the same time. This quality of the Divine that Esthappan (and we all have?) received as a share, of being and non-being at the same time, could be the reason why we are confounded by the reality of Esthappan and as a reaction tend to make up our own stories about Esthappan and different versions of the same stories. Since the Divine, the Sacred also could be understood and described only as being and non-being, the different names that people use to call the Divine and the different concepts, beliefs and traditions that
we build around the Divine are only our versions, our stories as our attempts to comprehend and handle the reality of the Divine for practical purposes. ‘God’, in order to be ‘God’, could only exist as fullness and nothingness, without beginning and without end.

Many people misunderstood Esthappan, in their attempts to define him by their fixed ideas/conventions/rules. They said: He is mad, he is a thief, he is ‘fake’ (vesham ketti kalippikan nokunu (dressing up and tries to fool us), he is a ‘womaniser’, he is ‘the saviour (he saved the child from sea), he is a miracle worker (he tried to heal the bedridden girl, turned stones into bread, brought stacks of currency out of air and distributed to people), he lives among the spirits (cemetery) and plays with them; and many more things. He looks like a ‘messenger’ from God (‘avadhoothan’), a messenger with a mission; his mission, definitely, is a mission of love and service. But does not appear to be a ‘saint’ in the strict conventional religious sense; he is human to the core. He seems to have power over the Nature; he knows the truths of Nature, the truth of present, past and future. But still, he is a loving and loveable human being.

People ‘construct’ a Esthappan they want to see. He does not deny what they say about him; he hardly speaks to the elders, but to the children. He is perhaps not interested in defining himself. He says, ‘Ennan ariyunnavanu enname vendennavum’ (for the one who knows how to count, there is no need to count). ‘Ennam’ (empirical truth/reason/logic) is for those who have not gone beyond it. Those who have gone beyond ‘ennam’ and already know it by intuition or revelation or faith find it easy to comprehend the play of the sacred-secular in life and recognize the play of the One as many, and enjoys the play and live it. Aravindan’s Esthappan appears as many and even appears in many places at one time, lives in ‘many worlds’—real and mythical, sacred and secular—and lives in ‘many versions’ of many different people. The film and the character of Esthappan defy all attempts at neat categorisation.

6.5.4.2 Esthappan: the ‘Author’s views’: In fact, Aravindan does not claim to have an author’s ‘pure version’ of Esthappan, he does not present Esthappan as his auteurial
creation as if he knows the ‘absolute’ truth about the character. In the interview, he clarifies this:

You understand Esthappan only through the stories people relate about him. There are people who tell one story in many different ways. In the film there is one person giving two stories of the same event. At this rate we don’t know what is real and what is mythical. Which story about Esthappan is right? Perhaps all are wrong.

Asked about the duality of reality and myth in Esthappan, Aravindan says that actually Esthappan is a very ordinary man, but he lives as different persons in different stories of people, assuming the level of a myth or different myths.

We started with simple statements on Esthappan, moving on to simple stories, then complex ones. By the time the story grows complex, one event has more than one interpretation. In the story of a boat man, there was a person called Esthappan, who now is the guardian and protector of the fisher folk, where as the Esthappan, who saves the grandson of the contractor is someone who is living in our midst.

How did he bring together the episodes, each one being a different story on Esthappan?

Film begins with the shot of Esthappan coming out of the sea; this is a story told by the fishermen making their nets, beginning with “Oh what an unusual brightness there is. It is like the sun has risen from the sea itself.” When this story ends, another story begins, “It doesn’t matter, let us find out what exactly happened at the church”. And so one story begins and merges into another. It is not the type of story with a beginning, progression and end. In our tradition this is called `sakha chamkramanam’ (free flow from one branch to another).

Aravindan admits that there is a timelessness about Esthappan. He is said to have been seen in Ernakulam and at Idukki at the same time. At one time he disappears into the space; that is when people make a search for him. Then the priest tells them, “Where can he go? He will come back to us”. The film ends with the dance drama (known as chavittu natakam) among the fishermen community on the Kerala coasts. During the dance drama, the camera makes a 360 degree turn and you see Esthappan sleeping on a nearby rock, the Esthappan whom people had believed to have

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68 Aravindan’s views on Esthappan are taken from the ‘Interview-Aravindan on his films’ done in Malayalam by Chandrhasan and translated to English by Georgekutty and published in Deep Focus (publication date and details not available). The portions pertaining to films Unni and Vasthuhara are part of another interview by Rajesh Rathore appeared in Cinema in India.
‘disappeared’. Aravindan explains the reason for ending the film the way it is, in the dance drama sequence:

It is an art form which is practiced by the Latin Christian fishermen in our region. Secondly it is a miracle play in which there is one scene where an angel arrives. Everyone who has been telling stories about Esthappan is watching the play. I thought somewhere this play might help in understanding the myth of Esthappan—because the viewers themselves create the myth. Somewhere this play helps to sum up the film.

Yes it does. At the end the viewer does not seem to have any problem in imagining Esthappan as real or mythical; one is not concerned about the ‘fact’ of Esthappan’s existence. Even those who might find it little difficult in the beginning of the film to connect the different segments and grapple with the incongruences one after another, would not have a problem towards the end. With dance, music, mythological characters from the miracle play, angels, kings, warriors and ordinary men all mixed and mingled and creating a polyphony of life, with multiple images and sounds simultaneously juxtaposed on the screen and on viewer’s mind-screen, the final sequence does not solve the mystery of Esthappan. As expected from Aravindan, the last sequence opens the door to the next possible stories about him and the mystery surrounding them.

This is heteroglossia, the realm of the secular-spiritual, of multiple voices in multiple stories—real, mythical, figurative and so on. And this great filmmaker from Malayalam cinema enjoyed this mixture of simplicity and complexity in his life and in art. He placed himself in the shoes of his favourite characters and experienced for himself what it means to be ‘small humans in a Big world’.

6.6 Imagining and Articulating the Secular-Spiritual in Malayalam Cinema, 1990s and beyond

It is a golden opportunity to live in this age of transition, in the globalized world; it is `one’ and ‘many’ worlds at the same time. To live in this world/s in this age is also a big challenge. When we stand at the threshold of new opportunities, exposures and possibilities, with constantly upgrading technologies and facilities to support us and to get us connected to people, places and ideas, we also realise that in reality we are not connected to anyone and most miserably not connected to our own self. We look for
support systems of family, community, society, religion and political parties--structures that used to readily provide our predecessors with philosophies of life and strategies for living. But today, those systems are also in constant flux, in an ongoing process of redefinition and restructuring. What could then be the newly emerging ways of meaning-making, based on sets or systems of signs, symbols and signification, shaping new ways of viewing the world, the sacred, the secular, and life in its totality, here on earth and the life after?

In the post-modern age, after the loss of monolithic idols and symbols of the old, people feel the need to fashion a new universe of symbols that would open up diverse possibilities to interpret life holistically from multiple angles that offer effective strategies for answering the ‘big questions’ in life. They do not want to repeat the mistake of some earlier ‘revolutionaries’ as well as ‘conservatives’, who enslaved themselves behind the barbed wires of the political parties or conventional religions. Not that people can completely break away with the past, but the past could shed its old meanings and take on new ones through a process of trans-symbolization, says Sebastian Kapen. In the convergence of the cosmic, the prophetic and the historical he envisages the prefiguring of future revolutions, conceived, visualised and realized through art and alternative spiritualities. (Kapen 1994)

Sunny Joseph finds more integration of peoples, communities and cultures across the world today, in spite of the on-going displacements and disillusionment on individual and collective levels, resulting from disastrous models of development, unending waves of immigration, unrest, hatred, violence and religious/ethnic riots, within and across the borders of nations and regions.

The outcome of this networking (especially through Internet) is that more and more people are now realizing that world is One. In history we had many great leaders and sages telling people that ‘world is one’, they printed volumes of books to say ‘the world is one’, but all in vain. Now everybody is saying (realizing) that this is just one world. This happened at first when ‘BBC World’ used that expression and people realized ‘oh, this is the channel of just one world’. The Internet has brought this idea of ‘one world’ among all humans, and at a very profound level (Sunny Joseph, context A).
But there are many others who are not as optimistic as Sunny, as they find more problems with the ‘new age’ which appears as a ‘superb model’ (in today’s young people’s idiom) of communication, community and connectivity:

Now we are in a confused stand still situation (sannigda avastha) where all of us are experiencing a spiritual thirst for self realization. It might manifest in our craving for communication and company….what we are actually searching and seeking is our own self. We are now in a period of time where we are seeking answers on how to overcome our loneliness and anxieties and insecurities. Since this stage is a transition stage, we can’t assume anything, no conclusions could be drawn. Now we are passing through this phase with its pains and pleasures, different individuals in their disorderly ways. We might be the first generation that faces this transition; surely we will overcome this stage. Any first generation will face some casualties (V.G.Thampy, context.A)

Paul Kattookaren adds on to the observations of Thampy and comments that the inability to encounter one’s own inner self has become very rampant among young people, the ‘netizens’ of today.

The greatest challenge is to encounter oneself; it is not easy for majority of people. So they go after distractions (mobile, TV etc). This is escapism; I noticed this in my niece, 22 years old, and now living in the US. She doesn’t know how to handle her interiority; she cannot be quiet even for a minute. This has become a disease (Paul Kattookaren, context.B, 1970s to 90s)

But Sara Joseph does not agree with the usual trend of elders to find fault with the young generation and conclude they are all ‘doomed’.

I don’t think that the present youth are totally without these orientations. I have seen many talented young people, also many young people with very dense minds/Hearts. But I have seen many young minds who are simply dragged forward by the attractions of the so called ‘globalisation and global market culture’. In all ages there will be only a small group of young people who would want to think deep and go deep in everything (Sara Joseph, context.A).

Now let us turn to the young filmmakers and viewers of Malayalam cinema: How do our young people, our artists and filmmakers and film-lovers, address the complexities of living in the present age? Are they taking recourse to convenient, mainstream political or religious ideologies, beliefs and practices as their support systems? Are they allowing themselves to be ‘used’ by the system, political parties and religious organizations? Are they also finding hope and ‘security’ inside groups and
associations based on religious, communal (read caste) identities like many of their elders? On the other hand, do we some young filmmakers in the line of G. Aravindan, who strive to address the human need for the ‘Beyond’ and continue to engage with the secular-spiritual in their artistic creations?

When we take a stock of popular Malayalam Cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s, we do not observe many attempts at a mature, nuanced approach towards the secular-spiritual in our films, but mostly we find the surfacing of regressive, male-chauvinist ideologies of ‘cultural/religious revivalism’, ‘religious nationalism’ and ‘communalism’ and only very sporadic attempts to counter these tendencies. Certain typical films like Devasuram, Aaram Thampuran, Ravana Prabhu, Narasimham that celebrated super star ‘anti-heroes’, met with wider criticism from critics as well as viewers.’ But there are many takers to the ‘spectacle’ and even high dose of violence that such ‘trend setter’ film models continue display on our screens today.

Incidently, by the middle of 2000s we have been witnessing an apparent reversal of the feudal/cultural/religious revivalist tendencies, led predominantly by Ranjith as reflected in a series of ‘independent’ films he scripted and directed, like `Kayyoppu, Thirakatha, Paleri Manickyam etc. A totally different attitude to religion and spirituality, quite contrary to his ‘revivalist’ scripts of the mid 1990s is seen in his 69Nandanam and Pranchiyettan and the Saint, both released in the second half of the 2000s, addressing the human-divine encounter with down-to-earth characterisation and imagery, appealing to members of any religion and even non-believers.

Sara Joseph talks about the very positive, creative turn that Ranjith has taken in his vision and artistic work:

Look at the recent films of Ranjith; we see his distinct mark in those films: `Kayyoppu’, `Thirakadha’ `Kerala CafŠ”, `Paleri Manickyam’, `Pranchiyettan and the Saint’ etc. Before that he was under some ‘macho fantasies’ like `Devasuram’ `Ravana Prabhu’ etc. When artists are ready to go deeper, then we see more creative potentials being unearthed (Sara Joseph, context A).

It is interesting that a filmmaker like Ranjith who could be a go-between person of 1970s-2000s and who works comfortably in the ‘mainstream’ as well as in the

69 Please refer to ’Synopses’ and ’Film Stills’ of some films mentioned here in the ‘Annexure’
`middle-of-the road' Malayalam cinema has made films representing both trajectores of ‘positioning religion in cinema’—the revivalist and the ‘engagement’—that this study discusses (Ref. Chapter 5). This ambivalence on the part of a filmmaker, who has lived and worked in both periods of study of this research (1970s and 1990s and Beyond) is a pointer to the possible meeting and overlapping of the two major domains of life, the Secular and the Spiritual, two key themes of this study.

Coming to Malayalam ‘art cinema’ in the 1990s-2000s (though such a specific stream seem to retain only little interest among today’s young audiences), we observe quite a few interesting experiments of the secular-spiritual in 1990s-2000s. Explicit examples are films of T.V. Chandran (Padam Onnu oru vilapam, Vilapangalkappuram and very specifically Kathavasehan) Lenin Rajendran (Anyar), P.T. Kunjumuhammed (Magrib and Garshome), Jeyraj (Deivanamathil) and a very special film that we have already discussed, Maargam by Rajiv Vijayaraghavan. Maargam and Kathavaseshan, in their unique ways question the ‘centrist’ and ‘teleological’ political and religious ideologies and address the confusions and predicaments of individual human beings, who are facing a loss of their certitudes and a loss of `faith’. Both T.V. Chandran and Rajiv Vijayaragavan are communist fellow travellers but in the 1990s-2000s they show the honesty and courage to engage themselves in an exercise of self-interrogation and introspection looking at their ‘black and white 1970s’, in retrospective.

We revisit the ‘confessions’ of another filmmaker and a Marxist (an ex-MLA, not just a fellow traveller), P.T.Kunjumuhammed, as the last comments in this section before we sum up this chapter on `Negotiating the Sacred and the Secular in Malayalam Cinema’.

I search God as part of my search of myself. I search in order to find it and merge with it. In my seeking what is important to me is that my life and work should not disturb the equilibrium of this universe, but it should enhance it, should make it more humane; that is the urge of my seeking. I haven’t reached anywhere because of my limitations, of my selfishness and greed. Still I can purify myself, keep doing that through my sadhanas. For me, my greatest sadhana is my cinema, my film projects. My political work does help me, but my work with images is what helps me to purify myself (Kunjumuhammed, context. A).
Summary:

We choose another response from another filmmaker, K.R. Mohanan, to begin summing up our examination of the emergence of the ‘Sacred-Secular’ dialogue/negotiation in Malayalam Cinema, its possible continuance and innovative articulations in the period 1990s-2000s and beyond. Mohanan, a product of FTII, with many others pioneered the ‘Parallel Cinema’ movement. Mohanan’s Swaroopam (real form or identity) made in 1992, was truly prophetic in that it foretold the surfacing of forces of religious revivalism and fundamentalism in the Kerala cultural political scenario. I asked Mohanan why we do not have many significant works in Malayalam cinema that address religion and spirituality from a positive and profound outlook, instead of the usual revivalist or reactionary attitudes. His remarks underscore the essence of the ‘secular-spiritual’ that this study has found as a balanced vision and approach, which espoused great filmmakers of the 1970s-90s, like G. Aravindan pursued.

What is the essence of religion? Faith is nothing but love and compassion. We do bring these values in films. For example you are moved when you see the film ‘T. D Dasan Std. VI. B’ (a film by young director, late. Mohan Raghavan, released in 2010). What do we call the experience? It is ‘spiritual’. Most of the filmmakers in the mainstream and other streams simply adhere to a conventional religion/faith and are very comfortable with it. Filmmakers don’t seem to have any confusions and so we don’t get any good films from them; they prefer to travel in straight lines. Alain Resnais has said this about Hollywood cinema: ‘Why there isn’t any good cinema in America? Because they don’t have many problems or confusions; everything is on time, no mistakes; no unrest, at least seen to outsiders (K.R. Mohanan).

In our age, to be ‘secular-spiritual’ could be more politically correct because we suspend judgement on both the secular and the spiritual; it is not about choosing one ‘true’ religion or ‘the correct’ political position or ideology. The secular-spiritual does not exert pressures on individuals to choose and maintain ‘loyalty’ to essentialist position. Secular-Spiritual is an invitation to open up to a broad spectrum of multiple viewpoints, standpoints and concerns, respecting many ‘texts’ on reality and their many versions, but always committed to reach out to individuals and small or big groups/communities in distress. In order to do that, we may have to use all forms of creative expressions, art, music, theatre, cinema, new media and all, as nodal points of
communication, connectivity and networking. Such small, community/interpersonal model of communication stands in contrast to the style of many ‘artists and intellectuals’ (mostly upper class, upper caste male) in the ‘older generations’ of the 1970s-90s. Their model of communication was targeted at the ‘masses’ (‘the proletariat’) and their mandate was to realise on behalf of these masses, the dreams of ‘liberation’ and a ‘better tomorrow’.

The ’1970s’ was categorical in its understanding and judgement of good and bad as binary opposites, slotting people as ‘villains’ or ‘victims’. Even among the new social movement activists we see ‘undemocratic/fundamental’ attitudes of ‘we are politically correct’, which necessarily branded other sections of the society/individuals as ‘apoliitical’ or ‘politically incorrect’. History has enough examples to show that today’s ‘absolute judgement’ may turn out to be tomorrow’s folly. ‘Secular-Spiritual’, however ‘vague’, ‘irrational’ and ‘illogical’ it may appear, is a ‘clear and distinct’ response against all kinds of ‘absolute’ certitudes and fundamentalism: ‘religious’, ‘political’ and ‘secular’ fundamentalism.

If secularism could have confronted religious fundamentalism head-on and removed all ‘evils of religion’, today we would not be discussing fundamentalism at all. But we see that the religions are here to stay and the problems they may create/cause are also here to stay. We find a great amount of people in India still sustaining their religious beliefs and traditions and we also observe more young people taking interest in religion and spirituality. So why do we try to deny or ignore the religious spiritual experience? Secular-Spiritual seeks to acknowledge the goodness in peoples’ secular and spiritual traditions, in the aspirations of believers as well as non-believers, and also strives to encourage the search for the transcendent in the immanent (not outside or ‘beyond’), in art, music, cinema and all, in view of utilizing the liberative potential of all such endeavours to address the issues of the present age that concern our nation and the world and the entire cosmos.

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70 Report of Times of India Survey on young people’s attitudes to religion and spirituality, March 06, 2011