GANDHIAN NATIONALISM AND MELODRAMA IN THE 30'S TELUGU CINEMA

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This paper looks at the cinema in India as a public institution and examines some issues that have a bearing upon the writing of a history of this institution. These issues are addressed in the light of 1930s Telugu cinema, particularly two films by Gudavalli Ramabrahmam: *Malapilla* (1938) and *Rytu Bidda* (1939). The films themselves that I wish to discuss and other spaces inhabited by the cinematic institution allow us to raise key issues related to the most important entity constructed simultaneously by cinema and nationalist politics: the public. The 1930s are important for other reasons as well. It was only with the arrival of the talkies in this period that cinema became a topic for discussion in Telugu language journals and newspapers. It was thus in this period that some of the earliest attempts were made in the public sphere in the Telugu speaking areas to understand the medium as well as define its functions.

Crucial for any discussion of the cinema as a public institution is the way in which the medium is imbricated with questions of democracy. Let me begin by drawing attention to K. Sivathamby's famous remarks on the subject.

> The Cinema Hall was the first performance centre in which all Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of the seating is not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power. If he cannot afford paying the higher rate, he has either to keep away from the performance or be with "all and sundry" (Sivathamby 1981, 18).

Although Sivathamby makes this observation with reference to Tamil cinema, its validity for other parts of the country — especially for what is now Andhra Pradesh — is undeniable[1]. Sivathamby's observation throws up a number of interesting questions. In the light of material now available on drama performances in parts of the Madras

Presidency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the absence of caste barriers within cinema halls would seem to be a radical departure from the practice in commercial drama performances of the time. I have in mind the prohibition of untouchable castes or 'panchamas' from entering drama theatres in parts of the Madras Presidency. For instance drama notices issued in Karikudi in what is now Tamilnadu clearly state that entry is prohibited for the members of 'Panchama' castes. These notices explicitly denying admission to members of untouchable castes date from 1891 to 1918[2].

It is not clear to me if this prohibition was or could be enforced. However, even if the prohibition was meant to dispel the anxieties of the upper caste patrons rather than prevent Dalits from attending these performances, its significance lies in the fact that the theatre space, unlike that of cinema exhibition, was not meant to be open to everyone.

Moreover, these notices alert us to the possibility that the space of the dramatic performance too was seen as potentially amenable to the disruption of caste hierarchies-something that has been said of cinema space—and therefore necessitated a set of prohibitions.

While it is entirely conceivable that new historical sources might result in a substantial revision of Sivathamby's claim, it is still possible to argue that historically speaking the promise of the cinema in India has been democracy. The heralding of the capitalism in the field of entertainment inaugurated the discourse of rights resulting in the broadly middle-class demand addressed to cinema halls for better facilities and to producers for better films. The thirties and forties film journals in English and Telugu provide ample evidence of this. Far more important for our purposes is the right of the lower class-caste groups to simply be present in the cinema hall—I have a right to be among the audience, to belong to a public, because I have purchased a ticket. I am not suggesting that democracy was in some magical way intrinsic to the cinema. There was something about cinema—possibly its alienness, its capitalist foundations and relative absence of feudal patronage—that prevented or at least checked the imposition of restrictions despite the possibility of disruptions in caste society.

The promise of democracy, however, was not automatically or immediately realised. It is beyond the scope of this paper to chronicle the history of the struggle by audience groups against the subversion of this promise by theatre management and the state alike. Here, I wish to draw attention to P. Muttaiah's unpublished survey of Dalit audiences in Andhra, which shows that theatre management in rural Andhra prevented Dalits from purchasing tickets to the highest-class seats even in the 1950s. A report by Samatha Sanghatana (1991) notes that in the nineties too—when Dalits could not be prevented from sitting anywhere they liked, provided they could pay for it—the presence of Dalits in the Balcony seats resulted in much tension with upper-castes. In the light of these findings there is every need to treat with caution the claim that has often been made about the medium's potentially unlimited reach—making it all the more democratic—precisely because cinema requires very low financial and cultural capital investment by the viewer[3]. Two points by way of clarification: capitalism-democracy-rights were not immediately realised since the cinema had to come to terms with the persistence of caste which refused to disappear within cinema halls, despite claims to the contrary. Moreover, the mixing of castes was perceived to be a problem even by those in the 'floor' class (the lowest priced one). Recalling his experiences as a spectator, Eedupuganti Lakshmana Rao writes that the audience in the floor class spat cheroot ljuice all around them to prevent others from sitting in close proximity (*Vijayachitra*, 'Vimsati Vatsara Visesha Sanchika', 1986: 116). While he does not reflect on the caste implications of this, I see it as an attempt to avoid being polluted by members of other castes. All this alerts us to the pressing need felt by various sections of society and the colonial state to *manage* the democratic potential of cinema. This is something I will return to in a while.

The qualifications notwithstanding, it is the absence of restrictions on the *consumption* of films — in principle — and the *experience* of freedom from caste restrictions, especially in urban areas (something that Muttaiah's study draws attention to) that allows us to conceive of the cinema as a public institution. I am aware of Habermas's bar on deploying the concept of the public sphere in the context of the 'mass' media (see Habermas 1989: 161, 245 and 249 where he explicitly states that the mass

media are not institutions of the public sphere). Nevertheless I would like to hold on to the notion of cinema as an institution of the public sphere firstly because in the Indian context the accessibility of the medium marks a significant departure from earlier performative practices. Moreover it is important to modify Habermas' formulation in order to extend the concept of the public sphere beyond the 18th century European context because it is a useful analytical tool which allows us to open up a new line of inquiry into the history of cinema. A methodological clarification is due here. By the public sphere of cinema I mean those spaces in which films were watched (theatres/ tents) but also forums where they were discussed, condemned, etc. I focus only on that section of the public which had access to the print media. Admittedly this was a fraction of the cinema's public but the only one which speaks in spaces that are already designated as belonging to the public sphere. As pointed out by Nancy Fraser (1994) the bourgeois public also arrogates to itself the status of the public. S. Theodore Baskaran (1981), Ravi Vasudevan (1995) and MSS Pandian (1996) suggest that cinephobia is an important part of this public's response. While agreeing with them I focus on the ways in which the anxieties that otherwise result in cinephobic responses were put to rest in the 1930s. Drawing on Sivathamby's observation and extending it, I would like to argue that the social mixing made possible by the cinema (within the cinema hall) is absolutely central to an understanding of what appeared on screen and the range of responses to films. For this reason I think Stephen Hughes (1997:83) completely misses the point when he takes issue with Sivathamby's debatable but not dubious assertion that cinema was a social equalizer[4] What was witnessed at the cinema was the assembly of what Partha Chatterjee (1997) calls (after Foucault) the population. The supposed 'universal' availability of cinema raised considerable disquiet among certain quarters but it also opened up the possibility of thinking about the cinematic audience as a microcosm of the nation itself.

Significantly, the earliest attempts by the colonial government to regulate cinema were prompted, by its potential availability to "all and sundry". Although the Indian Cinematograph Act, 1918 cites 'the rapid growth in the popularity of cinematograph and

increasing number of such exhibitions in India' as the reason for the introduction of the regime of regulation, the anticipatory nature of the move becomes evident from the Evans Report on Indian Cinema 1921 which begins by stating:

> There are two requirements for the successful operation of cinema publicity in India [‘the extension of the industry’ and 'regulation of the programme'] ; and unless these can be obtained not only must all thought of healthy development be abandoned, but in addition *serious consequences may ensue through the perversion of what is now the most powerful weapon in the armoury of the propagandist* [emphasis added].

The report goes on to suggest that the government actually take the cinema to the masses to ‘educate’ them even as it prevents undesirable films from reaching them. All this when there were only about 170 cinemas (according to Evans) confined to urban areas and spread across the subcontinent.

The colonial government was not the only agency that was deeply concerned about the unlimited potential reach of the medium. In fact it is possible to argue that the democratic promise of cinema was its most pressing problem with cinema in the opinion of the articulate, educated middle-class ‘public’ as well as the industry. This is not to say that these two agencies were anti-democratic or resented the assembling of "all and sundry" before the screen. Much like the colonial state, even when they were positioned in opposition to it, they perceived the need to manage / regulate the medium to ensure that its effects were not disruptive. As a consequence there was much debate, even in the earliest film journals in Telugu, on the purpose of cinema and the role they envisaged for it and a considerable body of writing on what was wrong with the medium. Writing about a different context Annette Kuhn argues, ‘strategies for regulation of cinema were guided by assumptions about *who* cinema was for’ (Kuhn 1988: 119, original emphasis). The pivotal role played by the (imagined) addressee of the medium is not something specific to cinema. Nevertheless it is important to keep this in mind when we discuss cinema of the thirties because of its significant difference from other media and cultural forms.

The increasing popularity of cinema and its spread into rural areas thanks to the rapid growth of touring cinemas after the advent of the talkie foregrounded what was certainly not a new issue: the accessibility of the medium to the population at large. One of the consequences of the spread of the cinema was the conception of the ’public’ as an entity from whose gaze the ‘community’, whether caste or religion based, should be protected. In the Madras Presidency, members of the Vysya community declared at a protest meeting that a certain Tamil film was ‘calculated to lower the Vysya coinmunity in the estimation of the public (*Madras Mail*, February 5th 1938: 12). The public here is conceived of as being external to the ‘community’, a collection of other communities, perhaps, in counterpoint or even opposition to which *this community is formed as a unified whole*. In the wake of the Malapilla controversy, discussed below, all social films produced in Telugu and Tamil came under attack by a speaker at a meeting on ‘Communalism in Films’ who felt :

> Producers and Directors of the so—called social films do not seem to have any object in view except to decry the Brahmin community and hold up their customs and habits to ridicule often by overshooting the mark and indulging in gross exaggeration...Far from being an instrument of instruction, *the social films produced in south India are having a demoralising eject on the general public. It is time the public set their face against vulgar and obscene films and demand better films with a healthy outlook and lofty ideals* (*Madras Mail*, April 5th 1940: 4, emphasis added).

Notice that the ‘public’ here is not exterior to the community but an extension of and synonymous with it. The public was not always seen as the other of the community. In fact Telugu newspapers of the twenties frequently reported the activities of caste associations and these associations in turn presented an audit of their accounts and activities to the press. The public was thus not something that existed ’out there' in some

unproblematic manner but an agency that was conceived and mobilised differently from that in other media.

Cinema was central to notions of the public because a large cross-section of the society had access to it. The composition of the audience, in important ways, underscored the problems of representational practices—what to show and how this was to be done. Not surprisingly, an issue that was frequently debated (far more so than with the print media) was mis-representation of a community. One of the questions I discuss below in connection with Ramabrahmam's work is the way caste (and caste conflict) is represented on screen in the early talkie.

That there was a marked appreciation in the value of the cinema as a public institution in the thirties is also evident from the increasing attention paid to cinema by the Telugu press. Telugu language periodicals which existed long before the advent of the talkies did not pay much attention to cinema although permanent cinema halls were in existence in the Andhra region of the Madras Presidency since 1921. Inturi Venkateswara Rao, who established the first Telugu film journal in 1938, opines that film related writing was not considered respectable due to the stigma attached to cinema around this time[5]. This reading of the situation corresponds with S. Theodore Baskaran's claim that cinema became respectable only after its linkages with nationalist politics were established with the migration of nationalist stage personalities to film (Baskaran 1981: 97-124). While agreeing with Rao and Baskaran I would like to draw attention to MSS Pandian's observations on the Tamil elite's response to cinema. Pandian points out that sections of the Tamil elite 'realised, within years of the arrival of the talkie that [the] cinephobic mode of engagement with the cinema was inadequate' (1996: 952). This is indicated by the shift from condemnation of the medium to attempts to appropriate it. The increasing respectability 'of cinema, whether it is attributed to its linkages with the national movement or the entry of 'cultured ladies' into the film world[6] had a great deal to do with the gradual recognition by the educated middle-class sections of the public to control — rather than ignore or condemn — the medium.

Let us not forget that the gathering of the population before the screen was occurring at a time when similar groups (similar in that there were apparently no restrictions on entry) were being mobilized for the explicit purposes of nationalism-whether it took the form of the anti-colonial struggle or ‘social reform', etc. Moreover, in parts of Andhra, film exhibition and political meetings took place in the same public spaces[7]. Further, theatre and screen performances were perceived to be similar to politics, at least in some quarters, as is evident from the witty parallel drawn by a prominent contemporary Congressman, Bezwada Gopala Reddy (Minister for Local Administration of Madras):

> We have too many actors and politicians. Politicians, like actors, lack proper equipment. Many people figure prominently in public life but when we analyse and scrutinise things we come across a good deal of inefficiency and underequipment. Politicians and actors, unless they equip themselves thoroughly, will find it difficult to keep the field for a long time (*Madras Mail*,]uly 23rd 1938: 12).

The interface between cinema and politics is thus well worth investigating. Clearly the examination of ‘nationalist themes’ in the cinema of this period and the involvement of actors/ filmmakers in politics does not address the intricacies of the linkages between cinema and politics and how these linkages influenced the formation of the concept of the public. How does the coevalness of two critical events, namely the increasing popularity of cinema after the arrival of the talkie and mass mobilization for nationalist purposes, matter for the student of cinema? How did this coevalness shape the perception of the gathering before the screen and that of the medium which made such a gathering possible? What was the means by which this anxiety—induced by the gathering of large numbers of people before the screen, among sections of this very gathering, the middle—class public to be more specific—was resolved? In other words, what were the conditions under which such a gathering was permissible and even desirable?

As is evident from the 1921 Evans Report, there is something seemingly inevitable about the masses thronging to the cinema: if they are not yet doing so, they will in the near future. Evidently there is a perception of cinema as an apparatus, *a technology* for assembling people. It is seen as a technology because its results are predictable. Since the silent era it was the mythological which was believed to demonstrate cinema's ability to gather the masses. The *ICC Report* contains a number of statements that amply demonstrate this perception. Diwan Bahadur M. Ramachandra Rao Pantulu Garu, High Court Vakil from Ellore (now spelt Eluru) notes that all Indians like films depicting 'stories from national literature, history and mythology'. However, he goes on to add, 'the attendance of the illiterate classes is, in my opinion, on the increase whenever Indian puranic films are exhibited' and 'the attendance of women and children is also in the increase though a percentage cannot be fixed more especially more especially if the film depicts Hindu religious life or story'. He goes on to add : 'Films depicting history, social reform and social life and industrial and scientific developments would appeal more to the educated classes. The illiterate population like mythological and puranic films' (*ICC Report*, vol III: 244-245). Almost all those examined by the committee stated that Indian mythological attracted all sections of the Indian people. See for instance the statement of Mr. B. Venkatachalapathiraju (*ICC Report*, vol. III) which clearly states, 'Whenever Indian films depicting puranic scenes are presented, large number including ladies and illiterate people as well as educated people attend' (416). Inturi Venkateswara Rao goes one step ahead and suggests that the cinema was 'absolutely democratic' and it was because of the mythological that its democratic potential was realized: the audience was so deeply engrossed in these films that they did not mind sitting with the members of other castes[8].

In the light of these claims it is possible to argue that the Indian mythological, more than any other genre, demonstrated the much anticipated 'universal' appeal of the cinema in India. In other words it successfully assembled diverse sections of the population, presumably overcoming class, caste, gender and age differences. Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1993) points out that the political justification of the genre was indigenism/swadeshi[9]. From the thirties however we notice a growing opposition to the

genre. By the thirties the justification of this genre on ‘swadeshi’ grounds was no longer possible due to arrival of the talkie which allowed all genres to make a similar claim. Simultaneously the mythological seemed to lose the reason for its continued existence despite its popularity. From the thirties there was a near unanimous opinion among journalists and other observers of the medium that the time had come for the mythological to die. In 1936 one observer reportedly lamented that ‘mythological subjects had somehow monopolised the fancy of Indian, especially South Indian producers’. . . [He added] "We want more and more social pictures suited to modern life and conditions" (*Film News of India*, September 1936:10)[10]. This is not to advance the claim that a complete suppression of the mythological was sought. The call for ‘more social pictures' was at times accompanied by the demand for scrupulous attention to ‘atmospheric reality, veracity, customs and manners, peculiarity of dress and other such things of paramount importance in a successful mythological or historical' (*Film News of India*, September 1936 : 10). The condemnation of the genre could be accompanied by the showcasing of particular films which presumably suited modern life and conditions[11].

Returning to the question of cinema as technology, according to the colonial state and the middle-class public the technology had to be used or it would inevitably be abused by someone else[12]. The key issue before various agencies was what to do with this audience and the technology that assembles it. The mythological versus social debate is centred around the emerging consensus among the middle-class public on the political functions of the cinema whose publicness could no longer be either ignored or allowed to remain untheorised.

Films, it was suggested, had to ensure that the audience which came to the theatres did so for a purpose. In the context of the thirties one of the ways this could be accomplished was when cinema’s public was made to resemble the public of politics or nationalism. Speaking at convention of producers, distributors and exhibitors organized by Prabhat Film Company, filmmaker V. Shantaram is reported to have, ‘dwelt at length on the part the cinema played in India’s social and cultural progress and how the increasing enthusiasm exhibited by the public in the cinema should be properly harnessed

to India's national progress' (*Madras Mail*, April 2nd 1938: 12). The way in which the emerging specialization of film journalism shaped itself is one of the manifestations of the manoeuvre to 'harness' cinema's public for nationalist purposes. Throughout the thirties and forties film journals took an active interest in national politics and represented themselves as being nationalist. *Roopavani*, a highly influential Telugu film magazine of the late thirties and forties, not only called itself 'the mirror of independent views' but also carried at least two articles on matters of 'national' interest in every issue. In February 1946 the Letters to the Editor column published one letter opposing its editorial policy on covering such issues and four in support (68). I wish to illustrate this point further by drawing attention to the wide coverage given—in print and on celluloid—to Nehru's visit to the cinema. *Film News of India* (vol I, no. 6, September 1936), quoting *Madras Mail*, carried a report titled 'Pandit Nehru Sees "Achhut Kanya" [d: Frantz Osten, 1936],' which described at some length the special screening of the film in Nehru's honour at Roxy Theatre in Bombay (31-32). The producers of the film, Bombay Talkies, went on to make a short film on the event which apparently '[had] been much in demand from cinemas all over India' (*Film News of India*, vol l, no. 10, January 1937:47). To say the least, the film is a clear instance of nationalist politics lending respectability to cinema.

What was so important and interesting about the incident apart from the novelty of Nehru and other Congress leaders watching a film? I suggest the Congress leaders at Roxy were no doubt seen ratifying the film in question but also the kind of mobilization of the audience that *Achhut Kanya* (and some other films including those I will presently discuss) was perceived to accomplish[13]. Lest the reader wonder why this film attracted the attention of Nehru and other Congress leaders, the journal provides the following analysis which sheds light on the film's achievement:

> The topical question of untouchability is handled in a skilful manner with a powerful advocacy of human rights of the untouchables and with a moral fervour which appeal equally to the orthodox "sanatanists" and

> progressive reformists who would find nothing in the picture that would give them any cause for offence (*Film News of India*, vol l, no. 6: 32).

In the act of bringing the opposites together, this film presumably nullifies the opposition between them. Moving up one level from individual films to cinema in general, there are two related but distinct ways in which opposites are seen to come together in cinema. Firstly, this occurs at the physical level in the cinema hall when political opponents get together in the act of watching the film, and secondly, at the level of representation when the narrative works to resolve antagonisms[14] in order to construct a unified, united society that is arguably a stand-in for the imagined community of the nation.

This crucial function envisaged for the cinema was the central issue in the controversy around Malapilla. Madras Mail reported it had received 'vigorous protests from Brahmins against the film' and cited the review of one Pandrangi Kesava Rao who was asked to review the film in a meeting of Brahmins in Bezwada (now Vijayawada):

> He thinks the film will create an impression on the public far different to that which the producers may have had in view . . . The film deals with the love of a Brahmin youth for a Harijan girl, but, says Mr. Kesava Rao, the romance degenerates into immoral suggestions. Mr. Kesava Rao warns the Government that 'the so-called non-Brahmin movement has crystallized into a Kamma versus Brahmin movement in Andhradesa' (Oct lst 1938: 12).

Another opponent reportedly stated 'anti-Brahmin feeling is visible everywhere in the villages'. Presumably the film, in no small measure, contributed to this state of affairs. Why did the objection of the opponents of the film, on the grounds that it vilified their caste, fail to set the terms of the debate on Malapilla despite the fact Brahmins controlled a significant number of journals ? Inturi Venkateswara Rao, who is himself a Brahmin but supported the film, recollects that some of the film's opponents changed their opinions after they saw the film[15]. Rao's suggestion of the intrinsic value of the film

notwithstanding the opposition was unlikely to succeed because it was grounded in an assertion of caste identity in the context of a film which purportedly depicted a ‘modern’ solution to the excesses of the caste system. I cite »a supporter of the film, one N. Pattabi Ramayya, to illustrate this. He replied to the Brahmin groups' accusations by calling the film’s alleged anti-Brahminism ‘a figment of the imagination'. He asserted:

> I have witnessed the picture myself and I can, without fear of contradiction, assert that far from creating communal disharmony, “Malapilla" is a great picture of recent times which is calculated to solve the burning problem of untouchability...The picture has already earned the encomiums of the *public and the critics alike*. It is becoming more and more popular day by day in every centre where it has been released, as evidenced from the great crowds attending each show. Leaders of public thought of all shades of opinion—*Congress and non-Congress, officials and non-officials, Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries*—have showered praise on the production and felicitated the producers (*Madras Mail*, October 8th 1938: 12, emphases added).

While the opponents of the film claimed that the film divided society and resulted in the degeneration of the public domain, the supporters cited the widespread appreciation of the film by sections which were otherwise in opposition—‘Congress and non-Congress’—or were markedly different in their response—‘public and critics’. Both sides however presupposed that cinema *should not* divide society into antagonistic groups.

I suggest the invention and the foregrounding of a ‘purpose’ for the cinema made it possible to conceive of its audiences as a nationalist public. While there was a consensus that cinema should have a purpose, there was a considerable degree of disagreement on whether individual films achieved the state of purposefulness, as is evident from the *Malapilla* controversy[16]. Relevant to the work of Gudavalli Ramabrahmam is the assertion that he was the maker of the first socially purposeful film

in Telugu (*Malapilla*)[17]—an assertion that has become increasingly uncontestable over the years. This assertion, we have seen, was being made even as genres other than the social were explicitly condemned for being backward and reactionary. Clearly a certain narrative mode and generic convention was being established as *the* means of representing the social. In the process formal and narrative features were, over a period of time, endowed with social and political agendas. Ramabrahmam's work assumes importance because he was among the first filmmakers in Telugu to construct a mode of address that took the question of cinema's purpose into active consideration.

Gudavalli Ramabrahmam (1902-1946), who it has recently been claimed 'ushered in the epoch of social protest in South India' (Kaul 1998: 177), had impeccable nationalist credentials. He was a close associate of the zamindar of Challapalli who distanced himself from the Justice Party (which was widely perceived to be a party of zamindars). Ramabrahmam was asked to establish a journal, apparently to launch the zamindar's political career[18]. The result was *Prajamitra* which soon became a forum for a strident non-Brahmin nationalism. He was also closely associated with the virulently anti-zamindari paper, *Zamin Ryot*, whose then editor—Nellore Venkatrama Naidu—appears in the credits of *Rytu Bidda* as one of the film's lyricists. Ramabrahmam's standing as a public figure was so well established that he was called a 'veteran Telugu director' by *Cinema Samachar* (July 1938 2 14), even before he finished making *Malapilla*. He had directed only one film (*Balayogini*, 1937) before *Malapilla*.

Before I analyse Ramabrahmam's work I wish to draw attention to the variety of ways in which film magazines perceived the linkages between cinema and nationalism. About a year before *Malapilla*, a film in Tamil titled *Lakshmi—The Harijan Girl* (1937, d: C. V. Raman) received favourable reviews. Its advertisement read : 'The Burning Topic of the Day Filmatised !. . .True to Life [;] Captivating, Soul-stirring and Appealing' (*Film News of India*, vol I, no. 10, January 1937). A review of the film noted, 'The story is problematic as the greatest curse of Hindu society, "Untouchability" is dealt with roundabout a fascinating story full of dramatic appeal. In South India, especially in Madras where this picture will be shown, this social evil is rampant and we hope that

apart from the entertainment value the picture will do something in checking the evil (*Film News of India*, vol. I, no. 11, February 1937: 35)[19]. The emphasis on a film's propaganda value was the dominant mode of responding to it in print, particularly when the film in question was presented / advertised as going beyond mere entertainment. However, the response to such films was not always positive[20]. Nevertheless the mode of reception of 'purposeful' films was so well established by the late thirties that the advertisement for *Balayogini* (K, Subramaniam and Ramabrahmam) merely stated 'Follow the Public(*prajasamoohamunu anisarimpudu*)' (*Andhra Bhoomi*, March 1938). What allowed films to claim that they addressed the public—an entity that was the stand-in for the nation? I suggest that the claim is founded upon the construction of a mode of address that transformed the audience that assembled before the screen. In other words, this mode of address conceives / imagines the audience differently.

Malapilla and *Rytu Biddu* take on the responsibility of explaining and justifying major socio-political transformations. It is thus not very fruitful to speak of their propagandist intentions; instead we need to focus on the ways in which they represent the transformation of the social domain and in the process ratify specific re-formations of the social. Although their nationalist credentials are demonstrated by the invocation of recognisably nationalist figures, the dedication of these films to prominent regional 'leaders' and the display of icons (Gandhi and Nehru and the charkha, tricolour, etc), it is altogether at another level that these films pitch their claim to being authentically nationalist. This has a great deal to do with the films' reformist intent as well as their realism.

Both these films open with songs exhorting what are apparently their target constituencies, Dalits and farmers respectively, to wake up. Interestingly, in both films the agency (Harijana Seva Sangham and Rytu Sangham) that will lead the constituency is introduced early in the film. The process of naming the constituency and the agency that will mobilize it also sets in motion the transformation of the former, a process which enables it to occupy a pre-specified place in the matrix of communities that is named as the nation. An important feature of these films is their 'realism'. In addition to the

nationalist iconography that highlights the topicality of these films, their realism itself is produced primarily by ruralism. *Rytu Bidda*'s opening song is accompanied by panoramic shots of rural landscape interspersed with scenes of village life: agricultural activity, cock fights, etc. A prayer to a pair of bullocks immediately follows the song by the family of the protagonist and soon after we are shown dozens of farmers tilling land[21]. The opening sequences of these films are interesting because the oppressed group in question is represented as occupying a cultural and political space, not merely a geographical space that is presented in a series of panoramic shots, that has inscribed on it a certain teleology: all this will *become* the nation[22]. In *Malapilla*, the opening song is sung by a group of Harijana Seva Sangham activists who move in procession through the streets of the Dalit hamlet (malapalli). The space we see on the screen is thus one that has to be transformed, whose inhabitants have not yet woken up. Indeed the space is rendered visible by the agency — the Seva Sangham — that will transform it. In *Rytu Bidda* the idyllic scenes of village life are accompanied by the opening song's listing of the oppressive ways of the zamindari system. All that the camera shows us is thus threatened by this system but then the song, sung by a yogi who reappears at various points singing more songs on zamindari oppression, is a definite indication that here too the transformation has begun. Further, the gaze goes on to identify and name the nationalist subject who will play a key role in this transformation even as he is repeatedly punished by the object(s) of reform.

The gaze of the camera is thus a transformative / reformist one. What appears on the screen will be reformed by the very act of the technology of rendering it visible. This is not only true of the oppressed groups—who will be organized and have their problems solved—but also the oppressors who too will change for the better during the course of the film. In both films the power of the reformist gaze of the camera is demonstrated at crucial points when catastrophe descends—in the form of storm, fire and flood—on the objects of the gaze. In *Malapilla*, where the practice of untouchability obstructs the romance of the son of a temple head priest and a Dalit girl on the one hand and forbids Dalits from temple entry on the other, two calamities are unleashed. The first is a raging storm that breaks out as soon as the father and the lover turn away the heroine from their

respective houses. The second is a fire that not only traps the head priest's wife inside the house but also ends up leaving the priest and his wife, quite literally, without shelter. In *Rytu Bidda* the peasants rescue the evil lcurunam from a flood, a calamity which occurs when the money lender's men kill the protagonist's injured son.

Notice that the relationship between the camera's eye and reform ensures that 'realism', which is produced at the very outset by scenes of rural life, is itself linked to reform of a certain kind. This linkage has proved to be so powerful and enduring that from Ramabrahmam to K. Balachander, time and time again reformist intent is inevitably linked to the invocation of 'realism'. By way of examining reformism—realism in these films I wish to draw attention to Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao's critique of Malapila : 'There is no caste on the cinema screen...no 'malapilla' [Dalit girl] in *Malupilla*—there is only Kanchanamala [who plays the role of Sampalata, the heroine of the film]' (Kutumba Rao: 1962). His argument that there is no realism in the portrayal of the untouchable girl is based on his observation that she sings classical ragas and does other things which actual Dalits were supposedly incapable of doing. The film would have been a total failure if a Dalit played the role, he adds. My intention here however is not to argue that the film is devoid of authentic realism. The reason I draw attention to Kutumba Rao's criticism of the film is to point out that the rejection of the film's realism, as with the review of *Malli Pelli* referred to above (in which the reviewer notes sarcastically that sequences depicting the hero's life in jail show people 'as free as a lark'), accompanies the refusal to acknowledge the efficacy of the film's reformism.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha's point about the cultural value of realism in the films of Phalke and epic melodrama is useful in the analysis of the films under consideration too. He argues, 'Realism here is a culturally loaded value, the aspiration of a technology that could chronicle the arrival of history into a land that knew only memory' (Rajadhyaksha 1993 : 58). *Malapilla* and *Rytu Bidda* are chronicles of the dawn of history : what we are shown is the formation of the nation which is imaged as a community that is unified despite social and economic inequalities. It is such a community that can lay claim to its past and its land. In Malapilla there are numerous references to the absence of the

practice of untouchability in the Vedas. Notably, this claim is made by Chowdaryya, the Congressman leading the Dalits. *Rytu Bidda*'s opening song makes it clear that its inhabitants, the farmers, cannot lay claim to the idyllic landscape because of zamindari oppression.

In both *Malapilla* and *Rytu Bidda*'s reformist intent underwrites realism and is in turn founded on their melodramatic narrative structure. I would like to look at these films in some detail to demonstrate this.

The Congress activists who enter the Dalit hamlet in *Malapilla*, invoking Gandhi, organize the Dalits and decide to agitate to win the right to enter the village temple and the use of the pond for the latter. More illuminating than the long speeches made by the Congress leaders, Chowdarayya (Suribabu) and Radhabayamma (Hemalata Devi), is the caption on a portrait of Gandhi displayed prominently which reads : "Hindu society, cannot let go of seven crore harijans". What has to be done to retain them within 'Hindu society' is a major concern of the film. Even as the antagonism between the Congress Dalits and the village Brahmins grows, Nagaraju (Venkateswara Rao), the son of the temple priest Mallikarjuna Sarma (VV Subbaiah) and Sampalata (Kanchanamala), a Dalit elder Munayya's (Raghavan) daughter, fall in love. The growing intimacy between them is contrasted to the increasing tension and threat of violent confrontation between Dalits and Brahmins. The lovers are soon discovered by Munayya and after a brief separation accompanied by a major misunderstanding, the lovers elope to Calcutta, taking Anasuya, Sampalata's younger sister, with them. Meanwhile the anti-untouchability agitation enters a critical stage with the Brahmins preventing the Dalits from using the fresh water sources of the village. More than a highly successful and *non-violent* strike, soon supported by the Kamma farmers of the village, it is the rescue of Mallikarjuna Sarma's wife from a fire by the Dalits that results in the priest's decision to throw the temple open to Dalits. Upon hearing this news, Sampalata and Nagaraju return from Calcutta and on the day Dalits enter the temple, their parents ratify their marriage.

In this film the romance and caste conflict run parallelly and the former does not contribute in any significant way to the resolution of the latter despite the fact that Nagaraju's love for a Dalit girl is in itself presented as a mark of his modernity and large heartedness. In fact the eloped lovers are almost completely cut off from the happenings in the village and only a radio announcement about the opening of the temple to the Dalits brings them back— not to be married but to be reconciled with their parents. Initially we are given the impression that the contrast between the attitudes of the castes in conflict and the lovers as well as the timing of the latter's first meeting is an indication that the romance is central to the resolution of the caste conflict. The first meeting between the lovers takes place immediately after armed Brahmins confront a procession of Dalits and refuse to let them enter the temple. Congress volunteers prevent violence by lying down between the two groups. This scene which ends with Munayya saying that the time had not yet come for them to enter the temple is cut to Sampalata and her sister, Anasuya (Sunderamma), singing in their isolated little place of worship which we learn is tuckedaway in a cave. Nagaraju seeks permission from them to enter *their* temple and sits with them despite being told that they are untouchables. We soon realise that the romance has a distinct trajectory of its own and the lovers abandon the village for a modern space – Calcutta—in which caste differences do not threaten romantic love. On the contrary, all three characters thrive: Nagaraju gets a job which gives them access to wealth, Anasuya goes to school and Sampalata is seen reading her English lessons at home. Prohibition of physical contact is an important signifier of the operation of caste prejudice in the film. This is not in itself remarkable since the film is purportedly about untouchability. There is an interesting discussion between the two sisters, Sampalata and Anasuya, about whether Nagaraju will touch them. Anasuya states, 'Those who have studied English do not have such inhibitions.' She nevertheless comes to the conclusion that he will not drink water offered by them. The crucial importance of the romance lies in its defiance of the prohibition against touch. Touch is frequently deployed to signal intimacy between the lovers. Running parallel to Nagaraju's English-education inspired transgression of caste boundaries is the more political, Gandhian, struggle whose victory becomes imminent when two Dalits, Munayya and Nagayya, rush into the head priest's burning house and carry his trapped wife to safety. Nagaraju's modernism, which literally takes

him to the quintessentially modern city, is neither condemned nor ridiculed. Nevertheless it is inadequate to resolve the crisis in the public domain which requires the intervention of Chowdarayya.

Chowdarayya is an upper caste (the name suggests that he is a Kamma: a non-Brahmin and non-Dalit) Congressman who organizes the Dalits against the Brahmins but also preaches to the latter and reforms the former. Early in the film he is shown as the sole representative of the Dalits. He is thrown out of the house by his landlord for this but he merely says that he is a 'harijan' and without any fuss goes to the Dalit hamlet. The migration of the 'caste Hindu' to the hamlet is an indication that he has shed his caste and is thus qualified to reform both Brahmins and Dalits: the nationalist subject does not have a caste[23]. His speeches to Sarma play an important role in the Brahmin's transformation. In the last of them he convinces Sarma that there are 'untouchables' in every caste. Simultaneously, he persuades the Dalits to 'civilize' themselves in order to acquire the moral authority to challenge the practice of untouchability. At one point he actually tells the Dalits that they are ill treated by the upper castes because animal sacrifice, drunkenness and brawls have made them subhuman. He successfully implores them to give up the ritual sacrifice of animals and drunken revelry at the altar of the folk goddess, Poleramma[24]. I have argued elsewhere that the state of being 'casteless' is an exalted one and not everyone has access to it[25]. In this film it is only Chowdarayya who is in a position to overcome the pre—modern excess of caste. Neither the transformed Dalit nor the reformed Brahmin is allowed to stake their claim to this privilege.

It is possible to explain Chowdarayya's role in terms of Ramabrahrnam's proximity to the non-Brahmin movement, and to his own caste origin (he was a Kamma). After all *Prajamitra*, the paper edited by Ramabrahmam, often carried articles by important non-Brahmin intellectuals and Tapi Dharma Rao Naidu, one such figure, is credited for the screen adaptation of *Malapilla*'s story. As pointed out above, the film *Malapilla* was read by its Brahmin opponents as being a part of the Kamma onslaught on the Brahrnin community. We therefore need to fully appreciate the pivotal role played by

the character of Chowdarayya in shaping not only the resolution of the caste conflict in this film but also in shaping the portrayal of reformers to come in later Telugu films.

There has been much recent work on the caste and gender markings of the nationalist subject. It has been pointed out that the 'Indian' is invisibly marked as Hindu, upper caste and male[26]. The question I would like to ask is what such a nationalist subject can accomplish. As pointed out earlier, Chowdarayya mediates between antagonistic caste groups and such a mediation is acceptable to both the communities because he is himself 'casteless'. He sutures over the rupture in the social by ensuring that both groups shed their *excess* which, to borrow a phrase coined by Dhareshwar and Srivatsan (1996), is an 'excess of identity' that is directly attributed to their respective castes. This excess is named in the film as the orthodoxy of the Brahmins and the Dalits' drunkenness and propensity to violence. Chowdarayya alone is endowed with the ability to intervene in situations that otherwise do not brook interference by 'outsiders'. The family and caste are two institutions which are depicted as being closed to the interference of outsiders. Early in the film Nagaraju is told by Munayya not to get involved with Dalit women. 'Aren't there women in your caste?' he is asked. In the same scene Nagayya rushes threateningly towards Nagaraju only to be warned by Munayya not to interfere, implying that this is a family matter. Chowdarayya, on the other hand, advises Sarma that he should re-establish contact with his son and also overrule the other Brahmins and open the village temple to Dalits. He also draws Sarma's attention to his son's large-heartedness when he had stated that the son of a high family ('peddinti bidda', also implies upper caste-class family) would have chosen to marry a Dalit girl instead of his beautiful first cousin. As pointed out above he also asks Dalits to transform their religious practices.

The absence in *Rytu Bidda* of a figure like Chowdarayya, whose ability to resolve social conflict is rooted in his location outside the groups in conflict, points to the problem Telugu cinema encountered (and continues to grapple with) in the representation of caste. The deployment of a Chowdarayya to resolve a caste conflict, but not a class conflict which is the subject of the latter film, also underscores the difficulty the

national—modern itself has with the representation of caste. *Malapilla* tells us that caste is an excess that has to be shed—there was no untouchability in the ’Golden Age' and there is no caste in Calcutta (representing modernity or the village’s future). Further, the quintessential modernist/ nationalist Chowdarayya is casteless. Kutumba Rao’s comment on the absence of Dalits in the film points to a larger problem than authentic or inauthentic realisms. Why is the malapilla of *Malapilla* not a Dalit? The casting of Kanchanamala in the role of the ‘inauthentic' Dalit girl underwrites the narrative's attempt to erase all traces of her identity as a Dalit (what are supposedly characteristically Dalit traits are of course defined by the narrative itself). She worships Krishna, not Poleramma; has a keen interest in devotional music in addition to being a singer who is so talented that Nagaraju is deeply moved by her song and finally, she is the star Kanchanamala. The excess of stardom therefore reinforces the narrative which in any case works to produce an eroticized other. The end result is a Dalit who is doubly de-Dalitized. Both Sampalata/Kanchanamla and Chowdarayya are thus a part of the film’s resolution of the problem of representing caste.

One last point about this film before I go on to *Rytu Bidda*. The resolution of caste conflict between Brahmins and Dalits and the generational one is directly linked to the trajectory of the narrative's melodramatic structure. Social and familial harmony is restored by Sarma’s change of heart, which in turn is based on the rescue of his wife by Dalits. The fire is caused when Nagaraju’s grief stricken mother weeping pitifully and stroking his harmonium before his photograph and saying ’How could you leave your harrnonium?’ tips over a lamp. Prior to this, Dalits eschew violence when Nagayya’s blow, aimed at Sarma, lands on Chowdarayya instead, injuring him seriously. These events which lead to a dramatic change of heart, do not affect the other Brahmins of the village. Interestingly, they remain staunch opponents of the abolition of untouchability till the bitter end. Further, as the film draws to its conclusion, in complete contrast to earlier part of the film when Sarma is seen as being the most orthodox of the Brahmins and threatening at one point to fight to the finish even if he is abandoned by his son and the rest of his caste, they instigate Sarma, and failing that, insult him. In short, they are made guilty in retrospect and end up being blamed for the social crisis. Finally the police

physically remove them from the scene for disturbing order. Thus a riot between the Dalits and the incorrigible Brahmins is prevented. It is the remorseful Sarma's *customary right* over the temple that results in the opening of the temple to the Dalits. The other Brahmins who are never personally affected by the earlier developments remain outside the melodrama and the reconciliation offered by it.

In *Rytu Bidda*, social conflict finds a different kind of resolution. While this film shares many similarities with *Malapilla* the most striking difference is that unlike the Dalits in the earlier film, the farmers are seen representing themselves. This has a great deal to do with the fact that this group is imaged as predominantly upper caste (but non-Brahmin too) and being fully capable of making its just demands. Unlike the Dalits, it is not made to undergo a process of self-reform. The agent of the reformist initiative is Narsi Reddy (Bellari Raghava), a member of the farming community. The significant difference in the representation of the Dalits and farmers underscores the relationship between caste and self—representation. The film works to produce the normative nationalist subject as a member of the non-Brahmin upper castes-two of the farmers' representatives, Narsi Reddy and Rami Reddy, have caste suffixes to their names. Their nationalist credentials are emphasised by the opening song which declares that farmers are the backbone of India. Even as it establishes the farming community as the centre of the nation, the film re-forms the social order in the village transforming the existing relationships and creating a new order devoid of antagonism. How this order is established is the subject of the film.

The film is in two parts and each has a separate but related resolution. The first part deals with the electoral battle between the representative of the farmers' party (thinly veiled reference to the Congress: in addition to the invocation of Gandhi and Nehru during the campaign, the tricolour and the charkha are among its symbols), Rami Reddy (Kosarazu, who also wrote some of the film's lyrics) and the nominee of the local zamindar (undoubtedly a reference to the Justice party's zamindari base). The village money lender or *Shavukaru* and the writer, *karanam*, who are both supporters of the zamindar, fail to muster support for the zamindar's candidate. Despite spending a large

amount of money on his candidate, attempted bribery of the electorate, large scale disbursal of threats by his supporters and an attempt to lock the farmers in the village temple on the eve of the election, the zamindar fails to prevent the victory of Rami Reddy. The farmers' electoral victory brings the first part to a close (the second part is separated by the film's interval). In addition to exposing the corrupt and undemocratic deeds of the zamindar and his supporters, the *Karanam* and the *shavukaru*, this part also demonstrates the incorruptibility of Narsi Reddy (who remains unmoved by the threats of the *shavukaru* who has lent him money, the breaking of his daughter's marriage alliance and the offer of a large bribe). We are also introduced to the zamindar's evil advisers who it later turns out are crucial to the resolution of the crisis.

By the end of the first part we realise that the victory of Rami Reddy deepens the larger social crisis with the zamindar's evil younger brother, and the dismissed servant Subbanna coming together to plot the former's downfall. Even as the zamindar's men unleash repression on the farmers, presumably without his knowledge, the *karanam*, *shavukaru* and the village *munsif* join the farmers. The zamindar's brother employs the scheming Subbanna to kidnap the zamindar's son and blames Narsi Reddy for it. When Narsi Reddy approaches the zamindar with a charter of demands, the latter begs him to release his son from captivity. Narsi Reddy's denial of the allegation is immediately followed by the arrival of the police who arrest the zamindar's brother for the kidnapping. The enlightened zamindar not only agrees to all the demands of the farmers but also gives away his 'rajyam' (literally kingdom) to the Rytu Sangham and says he too is a farmer now. The film ends with the inauguration of an ashram named after Narsi Reddy's dead son (killed in an accident caused by the zamindar). The very last shot of the film is of a Congress flag, with a background song declaring that there is no difference between farmer and king.

It is clear that the election of the farmers' representative and by extension the acquiring of political power, although seen as being important, does not lead to a solution of the larger problem of zamindari oppression and the social divisions caused by it. It seems to me that the film anticipates independence and goes on to imagine the nation as a

unified community. This involves the complete reformation of the zamindar, achieved partly by transferring the responsibility for the oppression of the farmer to his servant and brother. Like Mallikarjuna Sarma in *Malapilla*, the zamindar emerges in a positive light largely because of the greater evil done by others. Subbanna, presented as a comic figure in the early part of the film grows gradually and increasingly dangerous and begins plotting against the zamindar himself in the latter part of the film. The zamindar's wife, upon reading a newspaper report on Subbanna's misdeeds warns her husband that he is patronizing evil people and he heeds her warning by dismissing the man. Interestingly, throughout the early part of the film the zamindar is presented as a decadent, autocratic man who is almost always seen indoors talking to his dog in English, pampering his son and dressing up. The decadent younger brother of the zamindar who is a drunkard and womaniser emerges as the true villain of the piece[27]. Unlike Subbanna, he is consistently presented as a selfish and evil man. Rather early in the film we become aware of his intention to kidnap the zamindar's son. His final act of villainy—accusing Narsi Reddy of the kidnapping—invites comparison between the two. Clearly, he is a greater threat to the zamindar than Narsi Reddy is. Interestingly, he makes a speech against the law of primogeniture when he is arrested and is least remorseful about his plan (he apologises to Narsi Reddy for accusing him falsely). However, unlike Narsi Reddy, he is not *qualified* to challenge the existing zamindar in any manner due to his moral degeneration.

The naming of villains, so to speak, is an integral part of the solution to the rupture in the social. It also facilitates the closure of the melodramatic narrative which, especially in *Rytu Bidda*, piles upon Narsi Reddy's family one suffering after another. These include the breaking of the marriage alliance of his daughter, the injury and subsequent death of his son, and economic hardship; the zamindar is directly or indirectly responsible for all of them. The transformation of the zamindar, a move that absolves him of his misdeeds, occurs in the wake of the kidnapping of his son, an incident which demonstrates his own vulnerability to the kind of suffering he has unleashed on Narsi Reddy. Indeed Narsi Reddy himself draws attention to this similarity when he says that he too is a parent and knows what it is to lose a child. The zamindar thus realises that king and farmer are equal after all. But are they ?

Narsi Reddy is contrasted to the zamindar throughout the film. Indeed, the zamindar and his men view the confrontation between the former and the farmers as one between him and Narsi Reddy. Early in the film Narsi Reddy, who has kept his family waiting, is introduced saying that he was held up trying to bring about a compromise to end a dispute. He is thus a respected public figure and his stature increases as his and his family's suffering grows. Significantly, the film begins by asserting that he is a man of considerable social standing and naming him as the leader of the farmers. He demonstrates his worth by undergoing an ordeal of unending suffering instead of abandoning his principles. It is as if he qualifies to be the leader of the people because he suffers more than anyone else does. In fact Narsi Reddy's authenticity as the farmers' representative rests on his ability to face *hardship on behalf of the farmers*. The film does not depict the difficulties faced by the farming community (although the opening song and subsequent songs by the yogi repeatedly dwell on the misery of the community). The only evidence of this provided by the narrative is the Narsi Reddy family's hardship. The family's suffering is therefore crucial for underscoring the representativeness of Narsi Reddy, both as a typical example of the farmer brought to grief by the oppressive zamindari system as well as Reddy's stature as the spokesman of the class. Notable in this regard is Narsi Reddy's frequent generalisation of his condition as being typical of the entire community. For instance, when offered a bribe to support the zamindar's candidate in the election he says, 'At least now you should realise that in civilized society the farming community (*rytu jati*) alone remains free of corruption.'

It is necessary that he be seen suffering—by the spectator and farmers and their opponents — in order that he becomes the representative of the community. The gaze of the camera is thus the gaze of the entire village as well as the extradiegetic spectator of the film. At certain points in the film, the gaze of the two is unified to demonstrate Narsi Reddy's representativeness. When the zamindar's men confiscate Narsi Reddy's cow and injure his daughter who objects, the villagers are shown commenting on the injustice and brutality of the act, verbalising the spectator's own response. A more interesting and illustrative sequence appears at the end of the film when the zamindar and Narsi Reddy-

who fill the frame—come to an agreement on the farmers' charter of demands. By this point there is no doubt these two are equals and allies. The absence of other farmers in the frame only reinforces this. There is no indication that there is anyone else in the room but when the zamindar raises the slogan, '*Rytu sanghaniki ..... '* an offscreen chrous responds with, '*Jai*'. The cheer is of course in celebration of the transformation of the zamindar into a farmer and the end of conflict. We need to recognize that the village community and the spectator share a field of vision and the interpretation of the events narrated. In this instance the farmers become a *community of spectators* whose final chorus of approval of the resolution of the conflict erases the distinction between diegetic and extradiegetic spectatorship, hailing the formation of a community mirroring the unified village community *offscreen*, in the cinema hall.

What is the relationship between melodrama and the politics espoused by these films? The political 'message' of these films, which ought to be seen as a response to the call for making cinema socially purposeful and theatres 'our future school rooms'[28] is hinged on the possibilities offered by their melodramatic narrative whose resolution addresses the problem of *how* antagonisms that rupture the social can be nullified. Indeed, what enables these films to make a claim to being Gandhian is the manner in which the resolution of the narrative crises necessarily involves the reconciliation between Dalits and Brahmins and farmers and the zamindar without seriously disrupting class-caste hierarchies. Both these films gesture to Gandhi's notion of trusteeship. Narsi Reddy, Chowdarayya and even Munayya to a lesser extent are 'trustees' for the welfare of the other farmers and Dalits[29]. These morally upright characters are essential to demonstrate the justness of the cause they represent. One of the demands made by the farmers is that the zamindar accept that he is only a trustee of the land. Indeed, the zamindar and Mallikarjuna Sarma prove to be nothing more than trustees of land and temple respectively.

Nevertheless it would be wrong to assume, as some commentators have done, that these films dramatise—or reflect —Gandhianism or some other nationalist agenda in some straightforward manner (Kaul 1998, for instance). In Ramabrahmam's films the

melodramatic narrative is founded on what is named as Gandhian nationalism. Not only does this involve an interpretation of Gandhianism but also the mobilization of Gandhi and the Congress to authenticate the construction of the non-Brahmin but upper caste subject as the true nationalist.

It is important to recognize that melodrama continues to be an important storytelling mode, particularly in popular films which are avowedly political. One of the key issues these films deal with is how stories 'about' politics can be told on screen. In both *Malapilla* and *Rytu Bidda* the nationalist subject is a pivot for the definition and resolution of political questions. His personal or familial suffering is an important site for the elaboration of the socio-political problems laid out and later resolved by the narrative. It is thus the linkage that these films establish between hardship faced by the nationalist (who is seen as a representative of a constituency because of his suffering which is what sets him apart from those he represents) and the resolution of a social conflict that melodrama becomes central to the representation of socio-political crises on screen. The reconciliation of opposing social groups is carried out under the 'trusteeship' of the nationalist subject and a direct relationship is established in the film between the production of the authentic nationalist subject and the possibility of a transition to nationhood. What kind of a nation is formed around the suffering, nationalist, *melodramatic* subject or rather necessitates his production as a necessary precondition for its (nation's) emergence? It is one in which class/ caste conflict cannot remain unresolved and cannot continue to rupture the social beyond the penultimate reel of the film. And this is where the question of who is watching these films, and under what conditions, confronts us directly.

Gandhianism and even nationalism, whose invocation reinforces the reading of these films as being 'purposeful', is an integral part of the resolution of a problem confronted by the cinema in the 1930s. The positing of the nation is a means of *addressing* the audience, both as a physical entity that has congregated before the screen and a problem that cinema has to grapple with. As I pointed out earlier, the mixed audiences of the cinema had to be managed to ensure that the combination of diverse and

even antagonistic groups was not disruptive. While theatre-managements strove to do so at one level[30], the film too had to manage the audience. To put this differently, the narrative had to work towards nullifying social antagonisms because such antagonisms could threaten the very survival of cinema in its existing form as a medium for 'everyone'. We therefore need to take into active consideration two simultaneous sutures that cinema, as an institution, has had to accomplish : the onscreen suture between warring classes / castes represented and the off-screen one which maintains peace and socio-economic hierarchies within theatres. It is thus not surprising why a film which supposedly appeals to a specific group—particularly the 'masses'—is not considered desirable and why there is a dogged insistence that purposeful / reformist films which fail commercially are 'meant for all sections of the society'. Over six decades after the release of *Achhut Kany*a one commentator remarks, echoing the *Film News of India*'s analysis of the film cited above:

> Released in 1936, *Achhut Kanya* became instantly controversial. Tradition bound Hindus were aghast at the film's depiction of harmonious living and social mixing between the upper and the lower caste communities. Mahatma Gandhi in particular was seeking a synthesis of various social groups into one new young India. *Achhut Kanya* exemplified this on screen. The Congress party as well as progressive writers of the time earnestly believed in this ideal (Kaul 1998: 62).

In the thirties and forties, I have argued, cinema was seen as having accomplished a purpose when its public bore a resemblance to the public of nationalist politics. At the very outset this translates as a demand on cinema to deliver a public to nationalism for the creation of the nation. Such an understanding of the medium, not uncommon in this period, would insist that individual films are 'empty forms', which can be filled with slogans. More importantly—and this is why Ramabrahmam is so important for Telugu cinema-it is when the cinema addresses its audience as if it were the nation that on—and-off-screen sutures are ideally achieved, since the nation is perceived to result from the disappearance of antagonisms. For the middle-class public then, the establishment of the

linkage between cinema and nationalist politics results automatically in the (production of a unified public within the cinema hall because the discourse of nationalism is believed to have an inherent ability to constitute an undifferentiated public. Ramabrahmam's melodramas reinforce this faith in nationalism by constructing a 'nation' which is uplifting precisely because the films address the crying need for just such a public. Recognizing the contribution of *Malapilla*, a review of the film in *Andhra Bhoomi* (April 1938) declared that the talkie was commendable because it attempts to bring (internal) harmony to contemporary Hindu society. And it does so far more effectively than the speeches of political leaders or social reformers and the work of poets.

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Notes :

1. In fact a number of established film journalists and long term observers of the film industry including Inturi Venkateshwara Rao and K. Narasaiah are in complete agreement with Sivathamby's formulation.

2. I am grateful to R. Prakash of Raja Muttaiah Research Library, Chennai, for translating them from Tamil to English for me.

3. This claim is made in the *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee 1951* (pp. 39-40) which contrasts the cinema to the radio and the press to argue that the former has a far greater potential reach than the other two media. It cites lower financial and cultural inputs required by cinema as the most important reason for its larger (potential) reach.

4. Hughes' disagreement is based on his observation of a 'class-based taxonomy of local film audiences' by theatre managements (84).

5. Interviewed by the author, Chennai, 20th September 1998.

6. *Madras Film Diary 1956* has an entry on 'the first Tamil film in which family ladies took part' (8). *Film News of India* (vol I, no. 9, February 1937) lists Devika Rani as one of the cultured society ladies ‘whose entry into Indian filmdom has been able to bring about a marked change in the quality of our productions’ (13).

7. *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-28*, vol III: 421. Public meetings were also held in ‘theatre halls’ where drama performances were held. One such meeting was reported by the Madras Mail: ‘The first conference of the ryots of Godavery [sic] District was held at Rajahmundry on June 6 in Cintamani Theatre Hall under the Presidentship of K. Seetharamachandra Rao, Proprietor of the Dharmavaram Estate' (June 9th 1923 : 7)

8. Interview cited above.

9. Discussing what he calls the 'Phalke/ Bhakta Vidur’ idiom Rajadhyaksha says this idiom ‘went along with the line that a whole technology, to say nothing of a major culture industry, could now designate itself as swadeshi which itself sought cultural legitimation through the act of making and showing so-called "Indian" images' (Rajadhyaksha 1993: 62).

10. It was not in film journals published in English alone that such demands were made. Well into the forties similar statements were made. See Krishnaprasad, 'Sanghanni Baagucheyagala Sanghika Chitralu Kaavaali’ (*Roopavani*, August 1946: 25-26). The title roughly translates as ‘Wanted: Social Films that can improve Society’.

11. To cite an example, Baburao Patel, the editor of *Filmindia*, in his address to the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce reportedly said, 'All I find here [in Madras] are mythological subjects, produced in a crude, primitive way and of no use to our present-day life. These pictures are reactionary. Who wants to live in the past? At the most the past can be useful to us with its experience. But the experience must be interpreted in present day terms and made to provide guidance for the future' (Filmindia, March 1941 1 37). According to Patel Prabhat Theatres' *Dhyaneswar* was an example of a modern day adaptation of a mythological theme which did not suffer from these drawbacks.

12. Sheikh Iftekar Rasool, echoing the Evans Report argues: ‘Here is a great machine, in other words, which can be seized and deliberately manipulated to the accomplishment of certain definite ends designed

and sought by those in control of its functioning'. He suggests that its control should thus pass into the hands of 'informed and high-minded men' (*Talk—A-Tone*, vol IV, nos. 9 and 10, Deepali Special: 16) .

13. In fact, the film industry made concerted attempts in the1930s to enlist the support of prominent political leaders and public figures in highly publicized special screenings. In Madras, B. Gopala Reddy, Minister for Local Administration (*Madras Mail*, February 5th 1938: 12), P. Subbaroyan, Minister for Education, K. Venkataswamy Nayudu, Deputy President, Madras Legislative Council, and C. R. Reddy, Vice Chancellor of Andhra University (*Madras Mail*, April 2nd 1938: 12) attended screenings of films which were inevitably accompanied by speeches by the dignitaries. On such occasions public figures did not always lavish praise on films. In the latter instance for instance, P. Subbaroyan reportedly said, "I wish producers, especially of pictures in Tamil and Telugu, would realise that it is far more important to give amusement of short duration to our people than to offer them long productions which take four or five hours. I am sure I am voicing the feelings of the Tamil and Telugu public when I state that these productions ought to be things of the past."

14. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) conceptualize antagonism as the "experience" of the limit of all objectivity which points at the 'impossibility of closure' or 'the impossibility of "society"' (122). The authors argue, 'the social only exists as a partial effort for constructing society—·that is, an objective and closed system of differences.' In contradiction to this notion of a 'partial effort', it is usually assumed that the social is a closed system. While ideology attempts to ensure the closure of the social through the suppression of difference, 'antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of final suture, is the "experience" of the limit of the social' (125).

15. Rao cites an incident in Vijayawada to assert his claim. In order to weaken the campaign against the film, a theatre in Vijayawada (upon Ramabrahmam's instructions) offered free tickets to Brahmins with topknots. This offer coincided with the meeting of Sanatanists in the town. A number of Brahmins saw the film and came out convinced that it was great.

16. *Rytu Bidda* too was controversial in its own time and was in fact banned in Nellore and Vizagapatam (now Visakhapatnam) districts. The Madras Government refused to revoke the ban despite the efforts of H. M. Reddy who was a member of the Madras Board of Film Censors (Home G. O. No. 3914, Dated 24.9.1940).

17. *Madras Film Diary-1942*. See also Dakshinamurthy (1981) where it is claimed that *Malapilla* was the first 'revolutionary, message carrying social film [in Telugu]' (29). Such claims about Ramabrahmam and his contemporaries have made it possible for writers to lament the passing of the golden age of Telugu cinema in the sixties. Guy (1985) and Sastry (1986), among others, argue that Telugu cinema had a distinct

socio-political purpose before the sixties and label the age of purposeful cinema as the golden age of Telugu cinema.

18. Culled from *Srimantu Raja Yarlagadda Sivaramaprasad Bnhadur Challapalli Rajavari Shastyabdapoorti Sammana Sanchika*, nd: 1966.

19. All quotations from film journals in English are from the original text. Quotations from Telugu journals have been translated by the author. .

20. For instance, a review of an avowedly purposeful film, *Malli Pelli* (1940, d : Y. V. Rao) stated, 'There seems to be no purpose in the story. Excepting the widow-remarriage which is more or less an accomplished fact, for who would refuse to remarry so charming a widow as Lalitha (played by Kanchanamala)?' (*Talk-A-Tone*, vol III, no. 12, January 1940: 29). This review also raises interesting questions about realism and the work of the narrative which I shall address below.

21. Depicting rural/ local customs and practices later came to be known as 'nativity'. The credit sequence of one such nativity films, *Shavukuru* (1950, d : L. V. Prasad), comprises of a series of pans of rural life and accompanied by a folk tune on the sound track and is strikingly similar to *Rytu Bidda*'s.

22. Ashish Rajadhyaksha's category of the 'epic melodrama' of the 30s /40s/ 50s, a genre whose prime examples are arguably the films under examination here, is useful for our discussion. He suggests that 'the epic melodrama...came in the cinema to be uniquely seen as being more than a genre: as, indeed, something like a mode of cultural production/assimilation' (1193: 59).

23. Notice the similarity between Chowdarayya's migration to the hamlet and Sambu Sastry's movement into the slum to reform the Dalits in *Tyagabhoomi* (d 1 K. Subramanium, 1939).

24. In the film, Poleramma worship is an important signifier of the backwardness of the Dalits and it is implied that Dalits can enter Hindu society only when they are themselves adequately reformed.

25. See my discussion of Chiranjeevi's 'class-films' in Srinivas 1997.

26. See K. Satyanarayana (1992) and Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana (1996).

27. This strategy for rescuing the object of reform is adopted in *Shavukaru* (1950, d: L. V. Prasad) in which the moneylender's servant is held responsible for misleading him. Of course the moneylender pays for his misdeeds when the servant tries to rob him towards the end of the film.

28. Baburao Patel's phrase reported in *Filmindia* (March 1941: 30).

29. Speaking to a group of workers in Colombo Gandhi said, 'Each and every one of you should consider himself a trustee for the welfare of the rest of his fellow labourers and not be self-seeking. You must be and remain non-violent under circumstances however grave and provoking' (D. G. Tendulkar 1961: 297). At various points of time Gandhi spoke of zamindars, monied people in general and England as trustees.

30. There were numerous articles and editorials on the problems caused by mobs at cinema halls and the failure of theatre managements to deal with them. In 1939 the Indian Motion Picture Congress resolved to request the Provincial Governments and Indian States to 'secure adequate police help to stop pick-pocketing, sale of tickets outside booking windows and to maintain peace and order' (*Talk—A—Tone*, December 1939 : 7). On the, other hand, theatres were so successful in ensuring vast disparities between the lowest class and higher ones that in Andhra Pradesh theatres were required by law (Andhra Pradesh Cinemas [Regulation] Rules, 1962) to provide uniform flooring for all classes.

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