M. MADHAVA PRASAD

Film History as Cultural History

In this paper I present some information gathered from a variety of secondary sources about a specific characteristic of Indian cinema in the first two decades of the talkies and explore its significance for the project of writing film history. Much of the evidence presented here is related to South Indian film making practices prior to the rise of Madras/ Chennai as the primary centre of production. The argument of the paper also relates to the nature of this transition from scattered production activities to a concentration of facilities consisting of a number of big studio-owning companies and other independent production companies. On the whole it is to be noted that wherever there existed successful studio-owning enterprises, such as Prabhat or New Theatres, the historical trajectory seems to have followed a different route than what may have been going on in the south. This paper is presented as a report on an ongoing research project in its early stages.

The evidence that seemed to me to pose a challenge to our understanding consists of the following:

Firstly, it is observed that film makers in this period function for all practical purposes as camera wielding entrepreneurs looking for a cultural product to disseminate. It appears that the camera here is conceived (or

is effectively functioning) as a means of recording for circulation, which means that it is not yet a means of production; or if regarded as a means of production, then not in a cultural or aesthetic but in a purely economic sense. Here we may observe a striking similarity between the logic governing film making practice and that of early merchant capitalism: the skilled artisans make the product whose wider circulation is enabled by the merchant or the camera. The history of representability also comes into the picture here: representability itself as a cultural logic was at a particular stage of development, which contributed substantially to the predicament of the camera faced with a speaking subject.

In terms of production units, there seem to be 1) camera wielding producer-director teams, 2) theatre companies acquiring the technology for producing films with their own cultural content, and 3) most interestingly, entrepreneur couples with a background in theatre and/or the *devadasi* tradition. While it is often argued that Indian cinema sought musical talent from these institutions because of reasons like Indians' natural proclivity for music, the evidence may suggest that it is the dominant position of the theatre and the musical *kacheri*, and the prior rise to preeminence of a musical culture through the gramophone and radio, that together succeeded in instrumentalising the cinema as a vehicle for the dissemination of music, dance and stage drama. A contest between film language and the natural languages of the sub-continent may thus be surmised in which the former, such as it had become in the course of the silent era, was unable to hold its own in the changed circumstances of the sound era.

Thirdly, based on these observations, I argue that the transition to (industrial) capitalist production in Madras takes on a particular character thanks to the nature of the social whole in which it operates. In the 1950s, the film enterprises that arise in Madras are fairly big in size and ambition and it is not without reason that this is the era that is still designated the Golden Era in South Indian cinemas. Thus one question it prompts is whether this period of the 1950s in Madras should not be regarded as the second 'studio era' in Indian film history. The early years after Independence seem to have led to grand plans spurred no doubt by the abundant enthusiasm and energy released by the prospect of freedom/ free enterprise. Nevertheless the nature of the transition here is not a substitution of the theatrical cultural product by one that is in tune with capitalist ideology; what we see rather is a capitalist drive to streamline, standardise, reform and commodify the theatrical content so as to make it its own. Thus while capitalist enterprise thrives in

1950s South India, it does so without appearing to be propagating a capitalist ideology (although we do find in that decade expressions of capitalist ideology in a number of films including the mythologicals). Unaided by the fetishism of commodities, it resorts to the commodification and circulation of fetishes.

Finally, if this description of the cultural field and its balance of forces in the first two decades is correct, then a serious question arises as to how to do justice to it while attending to film history. I suggest that it might be sensible to treat this period as a synchronic cultural complex in which multiple cultural institutions and disciplines were engaged together in the production of culture, of which cinema was only a part.

All these aspects are touched upon in what follows, not necessarily in the order in which I have presented them above.

The line of inquiry of which this paper is a preliminary report was suggested to me by the biographies (some full-length, others barely more than a brief bio) of some South Indian women who were among the earliest stars of the industry, notably, Bhanumathi, M. S. Subbulakshmi, Pasupuleti Kannamba, Rishyendramani, Pandari Bai, and Savitri. It was Muthulakshmi Reddy, known for her reformist efforts to rehabilitate the women of the *devadasi* tradition, who remarked in the late 1930s that the film industry was providing new shelter to the *devadasi* system. And indeed it is a matter of common knowledge that until the campaign to draw 'cultured ladies' into the acting profession got underway, and for a long time after that (this history is documented in detail by Neepa Majumdar), it was among the *tawaifs* and *devadasis*, and the Anglo-Indian community, that the industry sought acting talent. The story here is undoubtedly more complicated than what Reddy implied, although her remarks acquire validity even within a revised history of this relation between the institutions of courtesanal performance (music and dance), the popular theatre, and cinema. This paper is a first attempt to explore this relationship and the difference it makes to our understanding of film history, using South Indian examples for the most part.[1]

The legendary Telugu and Tamil star Savitri's biographer Pallavi writes:

> Theatre played a direct role in Savitri making the move into the cinema field. Everybody here (theatre) was eager to get into the movies. After Jaggayya introduced her on the stage, she acted in several plays. Again she toured many cities...travelled far and wide. When she was working for Jaggayya's theatre company, an all India dance and drama competition was held in Kakinada. Along with Jaggayya's troupe, Savitri too reached Kakinada. There she performed

the snake dance (pamulavadi nrityam), a song from the film *Balaraju* in which Anjali Devi had acted, both of which proved popular among the audience. On public demand she performed it a second time. Among those who requested an encore was Prithviraj Kapoor who was there as chief guest. Savitri won the first prize in the competition, which was presented to her by Prithviraj Kapoor. (Pallavi, 11)

Savitri

Besides this, Savitri worked with several other theatre companies, including Dukkipati Madhusudanrao's Excelsior Club and N.T. Rama Rao's National Art Theatre. Her uncle Venkatramayya Chaudhuri was her manager.

When Savitri entered the theatre field, movies were already getting popular. Who is going to come to see plays now, better close shop, was the general sentiment. Theatre people all were looking hopefully towards the cinema. The cinema people in turn would frequent the theatre, scouting for acting talent. The general thinking among theatre people was that it would be wise to get into the movies quickly before they were all forced out of their business. (Pallavi, 11)

Savitri's uncle K.V. Chaudhuri started a theatre company, Navabharata Natyamandali, with Subrahmanya Sharma as dance director. For three years Savitri 'saw what it meant to run a drama company.' In 1948, she went to Madras. She was twelve years old at the time and one of the few who actually succeeded in making a career in the movies. Many others were making the same journey, and returning to the theatre after unsuccessful attempts to get into the movies. In the 1950s, still considered the 'Golden Era' of many Indian language cinemas, Savitri was one of the top stars in the multilingual Madras film industry. She started her career in films at a time when, nearly two decades into the sound era, the South Indian film industry was developing a concentration of facilities in a big city, significantly different from the 'one big family' (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy) studios of the early talkie era.

The indebtedness of Indian cinema, South Indian cinema in particular, to the theatre and/or other performance traditions (*devadasi/tawaif*) is well known and Savitri's career exemplifies this connection very well. However, thanks to the practice of writing separate histories of the different artistic

disciplines, we tend to see in this relation a state of dependency specific to the infancy of the talkies, soon to be overcome. While the persistence of aesthetic dependency (theatrical *mise-en-scène*, frontality etc.) has been widely acknowledged and studied in depth, the institutional relations that prevailed in the first two decades have not received the attention they deserve. On a hunch, I began to look closely at institutional factors, relations between different artistic faculties and the personnel drawn from them. In order to do so, I had to draw a boundary around the first two decades, thus cutting off this time period from its tutelage to the cinema of the '50s (as a time of growing up), and bringing into focus a synchronic field of cultural activity in which cinema, having been severely handicapped by the advent of sound (the reasons for which we will discuss later), finds itself thoroughly entangled in the prevailing larger assembly of cultural faculties. In this paper, I provide a very selective description of this cultural field, focusing in particular on a few prominent women who were actor-singers,[2] but also, in almost every case, entrepreneurs who bring their cultural and business acumen acquired in the theatre or music industries to the cinema. They are some of the big early film producers and actors (and other things besides). Based on this admittedly meagre historical information, I then offer a tentative reading of the economic logic governing cultural production in the 1930s and 1940s.

Kannamba

If Savitri's advent marks the beginning of the era in which the Madras-based studios and film companies were rapidly becoming dominant, Pasupuleti Kannamba belongs to the period of the cinema's complete dependence on the theatre and other performing arts. In 1948, when Savitri left for Madras in search of a career in films, Kannamba was already fading from the screen. By this time, as the cinema was gaining the upper hand, theatre companies were selling themselves piecemeal to the studios. A generation older than Savitri, Kannamba was not just an actor—she was also joint proprietor of her production company, along with her husband Kadaru Nagabhushanam. Producer and director P. Pullaiah (himself part of a film entrepreneur couple with the actress Shanthakumari) recalls that in 1934, having decided to make a film based on the Harischandra story, the production company approached the theatre company where Kannamba was already a well-known actress to hire her for the role of Taramati. At the time she was performing in Bellary. The manager laid down

the condition that if they wanted Kannamba they would have to hire the whole troupe! Left with no choice, the film company took the entire troupe to Kolhapur where the film was shot, and released in 1935. Subsequently she appeared in a number of films—*Draupadivastraharanam* (1936), *Kanakatara* (1937), *Grihalakshmi* (1938), *Chandika* (1940), *Bhojakalidasu* (1941), *Talliprema* (1941), *Mahatma Gandhi* (docu; 1941), *Sumati* (1942), *Padukapattabhishekam* (1945) etc.—and is regarded as one of the most successful stars of the early talkie era.[3]

Those were the days when, to be an actor, all you needed was to be able to sing, as a comment in *Vijayachitra* of 1966 has it. Kannamba had her own film company, retaining the name of her theatre company, Sri Rajarajeswari Natyamandali. She was the producer for all the films made by this company, apart from acting in them. Her business partner and joint proprietor was also her husband Kadaru Nagabhushanam whom she married while they were still a theatre company. H. Ramesh Babu notes that Kannamba retained her family name after marriage. (Ramesh Babu, 61). Among the many types of production units discussed in film histories, one does not find references to such a unit, with a producer-director and actor-singer at its centre.

Bhanumathi

Another 'natagayani' (as these singer-actresses were known in Telugu) who married a film producer-director was Bhanumathi, who went on to become a director herself. She also composed music for some of her films, wrote scripts and short stories, and in her autobiography claims to have had other skills too. Marriage in her case was a dramatic adventure: defying her family's wishes and helped by friends, she married director Ramakrishna in secret, after which they went on to start their own company.

M S Subbulakshmi

A third, somewhat different example, this time from Tamil Nadu, is that of M. S. Subbulakshmi who is better known now as a singer of devotional music. Rejecting a princeling's offer to make her his

mistress, which was the best life that a *devadasi* in those days could aspire to, Subbulakshmi left home and returned to Madras where she had some contacts, determined to become a film actor (and singer of course). After a few films, her husband, aware of her intense love for the popular actor G. N. Balasubramaniam, with whom she featured in a couple of films, turned her towards the high cultural world of classical Karnatic music where she achieved worldwide fame after submitting herself unquestioningly to his tutoring and management.[4]

There are other such cultural entrepreneur couples emerging in this period, about whom I have yet to gather sufficient information. Thus it was Pandari Bai, the leading female actor of the 1950s Kannada cinema, who gave Rajkumar his first social role in her own production, *Rayara Sose*. Her own career in Kannada cinema began in the ealy 1940s. This entire history of female entrepreneurs from the theatre who established film companies in the early decades remains to be written. These women, many of whom were from a *devadasi* background, while others may have come from indigent Brahmin families where musical training for girls was prevalent, were able to combine acting with entrepreneurship as long as the cinema was dependent upon the theatre.[5] Seen from their perspective, the cinema was a technology for expanding their theatre business and making it more profitable.

Another aspect of this story, which I can only briefly refer to here, is the involvement of theatre companies themselves in film production. This is the case with Kannamba's company, as already noted. Subbaiah Naidu and Gubbi Veeranna of Gubbi Company were two such figures in Kannada. Rajkumar, the pre-eminent star of the Kannada cinema for several decades, whose spirit still haunts the industry, was an actor in the Gubbi Theatre Company when he was called to Madras to audition for his first role in *Bedara Kannappa*. These theatre companies, in Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu were hugely popular in the 1930s and many of their leading actors enjoyed star status. This was the period when young women were beginning to appear on stage, although the predominant trend was still for young boys and grown men to play the female roles. Theatre mediated the entry of girls into the film industry in most cases, although there were some (like M. S. Subbulakshmi) who went directly into the movies after a brief career in public singing.

Thus two dynamics are in progress simultaneously in the forties and the fifties on the one hand, and especially in the first two decades of the talkies, actor-singers, who came from the theatre but also from other performance traditions like dance, *harikatha* (Pandari Bai) etc., enjoy a prominence due

to training in various aspects of performance. This enables some of them as individuals and as proprietors of drama companies to venture into film production. While other initiatives are also afoot, these ventures dominate the scene in the early years. At the same time, and especially in the late forties, Madras becomes the base for a number of studios which operate as capitalist firms. In the earlier era, theatre troupes and actor-singer units travelled to Kolhapur, Calcutta or Bombay, where they lived and completed their films in the studios available on rent there. Since the drama companies were 'touring companies' by definition, perpetually on the move and performing in several cities and towns, going to Kolhapur or Calcutta was only marginally different from what they were used to doing already.

But soon another dynamic was initiated and this coincides with the rise of production companies equipped with their own studios in Madras. Gemini (established in 1941), Vijaya-Vauhini (formed by Vijaya Productions taking over a sick Vauhini Studios' properties), AVM (established in 1946, shifts to Madras in 1948) and other smaller firms sprouted and such concentration of facilities in Madras meant that it became a production centre for the entire region. Although the people associated with these companies were active well before this turn, their activities remained occasional, dependent on facilities in other cities, and of course, as capitalist enterprises, they were initially dependent on the technical and cultural skills which were then the monopoly of the theatre companies. But in a development that is an uncanny repetition of early developments in capitalism in Europe, we see the film production enterprise go through an initial phase where producer-directors had to approach theatre companies and seek their cooperation in producing a film (as we have seen with Kannamba). By the fifties, however, this was no longer necessary. Talents were abandoning theatre companies (they could always go back, and many did) and seeking out opportunities in Madras, as we have seen while discussing Savitri above. Travelling to Madras now became a necessary initial step in entering the film business.

The theatre-cinema connection is by no means a neglected topic in the scholarship. What I want to do here, however, is to explore the history of the connection between the stage and the screen or rather, bracketing out the predominantly aesthetic approach signalled by these terms for the time being, attend to the relation between two forms of cultural entrepreneurship which succeeded one another and co-existed for a short while. It is in particular the historical significance of this period of co-existence in an atmosphere of mutual regard and dependency that I am interested in exploring. Needless

to say I expect that this exploration will eventually bring us back to aesthetic questions concerning the nature of (South) Indian cinema.

When we attend to the aesthetic question we normally talk about what the cinema inherited from the theatre: of these we can briefly consider three aspects. One, as in the work of Brewster and Jacobs, looks at the cinema's debt to the theatre in terms of the pictorial, which was well advanced on stage by the time the cinema came round to trying its hand at it. In India the debt to Raja Ravi Varma and to the company theatre is also partially about this aspect, as evidenced by the work of Anuradha Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha. A second line goes back to the stage melodrama as a source of narrative material and modes. While Peter Brook bracketed out the genre differences in order to highlight the essential features of the melodramatic aesthetic, others (eg. Elsaesser) have paid more attention specifically to stage melodrama. Even so, this line of inquiry is also premised on a fundamental difference between the two, and is only concerned with identifying and understanding what the cinema owes to other forms of art. A third aspect is specifically Indian: the persistence of theatricality in cinematic narration, the frontality of *mise-en-scène* and address, the flatness and lack of depth, the relative absence of technologically enabled movement, the heavy reliance on playscripts, singing styles and singers, all of these are well known. From a film historical perspective these features can either be regarded as a sign of the cinema's underdevelopment or as collectively bestowing on Indian cinema the unique characteristics that have won it the appreciation of the world. Finally we may also take note of the plays which become hugely successful and come to be identified with a particular national culture, and are then turned into films. Many South Indian films (eg. *Sampathige Saval, Ardhangi, Sadarame*) were originally stage plays and it was their already established popularity among theatre audiences that drew filmmakers to them. (A rather unusual case here is that of the Assamese play *Joymati* which also went on to become the first Assamese film, and is regarded as having played an important role in the formation of Assamese identity.)[6]

I want to draw attention to a gap that arises when we consider these developments under two different frameworks. Considered as a part of *film history,* all of these become a matter of cinema's indebtedness to, and continuity with, previously dominant cultural forms. All such considerations are referred in the final analysis to the development of cinema as an independent cultural form. As against this, consider a different framework, broader, more general, such as *cultural history*: in such a framework, this history demands to

be considered for its own sake. The cultural history framework eliminates the restrictive vectors that determine the concerns of singular histories and tends to place them in relation to each other in a synchronic field of actual events. There are not only new forms which may or may not draw from the old, but there are also, in specific moments, the co-existence, mutual influence, and competition between forms. Considered from the vantage of a cultural history, the option of regarding these as 'pre-historical' to the mature form or a primitive stage is eliminated and the need arises to make sense of such moments in their own right. The need is all the greater in the case of (South) Indian cinema because of the persistence of the theatrical legacy in the cinema.

What Tom Gunning did with the idea of a 'cinema of attractions' was to draw a line around the films of the first decade of cinema so that they ceased to be regarded as the primitive stage, a time of learning during which, like a child learning to speak, the cinema groped its way towards its final purpose: narrative cinema. Liberated from such a historical bondage, this early cinema then reveals its own essence: it was a cinema of attractions. It participated in the cultural milieu of its time and related to other entertainments in a kindred fashion. To be sure, this is not a methodological manouevre that can be abstracted and employed at random, but I believe that in the 1930s and 1940s in the southern language cinemas of the early talkie era a fresh beginning was made that justifies recourse to such a drawing of boundaries. In other words, the exercise undertaken here is to treat the early decades of the talkie era as a time when cinema needs to be located within a cultural milieu in which other arts enjoyed preeminence. In this milieu the 'agency' of the cinematic will is found to be somewhat weak, and a relation of dependence upon the other arts and technologies determines its character. A 'film history' that is dedicated to narrating the progress of the cinematic art will no doubt mark this transition from silent to sound as significant but it is duty bound to get on with the history after duly noting the dependence on the theatre, the prominence of the actor-singers, etc. Instead of such an approach, the idea here is to isolate the cinema of the early decades from what was to come later, so as to do justice to the cultural complex that was characteristic of the time and the cinema's role in that complex.

Everything is ultimately about attending to the specificities of a situation while keeping in mind the logical constraints (what is logically possible or not possible) that a form brings with it. Historical and logical considerations must go together. One remarkable difference that is at issue here and which

illustrates the problem of specificity of time and place is the fact that in India the advent of the talkies had the effect of silencing the film industry, in the sense of depriving it of its own speech, pushing it into abject dependence upon the flourishing popular theatre. Of course, this is not the case everywhere in India but in the three southern film industries it has been a constitutive influence. The same can perhaps be said of the Hindi cinema in the first two decades of the talkies. When compared to say the Bengali industry, where, as Madhuja Mukherjee has argued, a 'cathedral of culture' model functioned in receptivity to an urban middle class by highlighting cinema's interest in and dependence on literature (i.e., the novel), the South Indian scene shows a greater degree of dependence on the theatre. But this also means that the process of change is economically very interesting.

Consider the nature of the contract that was made between the film company and the drama troupe in the instance of Pullaiah's Harischandra project mentioned above. From the point of view of the film company, the deal must have meant an increase in the casting budget. Had they been able to hire Kannamba alone, they could have taken her to Kolhapur and hired locally available artistes for other roles in the film. Cost escalation (assuming it was significant) is thus the only difference that the deal makes to the film producer. From the point of view of the drama troupe, going to Kolhapur was no different from going to Bellary or Guntur. The troupe without Kannamba would have had to make do with a lesser talent or cease performance altogether until her return. By striking a deal for the whole troupe to be hired, the company thus managed to turn the Kolhapur trip into just one more of the numerous camps where they would stop and perform as an itinerant drama company. For them the difference would be in the nature of the work performed, or rather the conditions under which the work was performed. Instead of putting up shows on their own, for a live audience, they were now putting up the show for a camera. Besides, this necessitated breaking up the performance according to an extraneous rationale to which the performance had to adjust itself. As it happened, at the time this extraneous rational—i.e. the logic of filmic narration—was not so well developed as to immediately fragment the theatrical scenes and reassemble them on the editing table to produce an altogether new effect. In this case, we can clearly discern the balance of forces between the theatre and cinema. The camera records. At this time, due to the necessity of including human voices/speech in cinematic narrative, the cinema had had to fall back on the resources of the flourishing company theatre of the time. This is the period of the reign of the

actor singers, who could sing and act, in other words, deliver a more or less finished good for the camera to capture and the company to circulate. Of the two ways in which the film industry could have overcome this dependence, one was easier than the other. Recourse to an independent film language and insistence on conformity to its requirements was the harder option. Apart from the setback suffered by film language with the advent of the talkies, it could be surmised that the nature of the film audiences also argued against such an option.

It is thus that we observe in the Indian film industry a turn at the beginning of the talkie era which reduplicates the conditions under which merchant capitalism gave way to industrial capitalist enterprise. Early Indian talkies, we are arguing here, manifests a merchant capitalist character, involving buying cheap from an artisanal producer of goods and selling for a profit away from the locus of production. As this relationship develops, by the 1950s, there is consolidation of production facilities which enables the adoption of industrial capitalist methods. We can discern here an intimate link between the aesthetic autonomy of film and the prevailing mode of production. Moreover, we will see that while the prevailing mode of production (the overall conditions, the nature of social relations under which production is undertaken) at the level of the Indian state as a whole sees a change with the adoption of a state capitalist strategy, the film industry remains excluded from this project. Its growth as a capitalist industry is thus retarded, even though in the 1950s the industry behaved as if it was a full-fledged capitalist enterprise. Perhaps it was the surging enthusiasm of the first decade of independence that propelled these entrepreneurs towards full-scale capitalism. However, without the necessary integration with the larger economic structure, or perhaps because the latter was itself a mixture of conflicting logics, the industry's project of working through the relation with the theatre towards autonomy was severely inhibited. What we observe in the 1950s is an industry that has overcome institutional heteronomy and that recommodifies the borrowed elements in its own unique way designed to streamline the product (the individual narrative film). Thus the constant and unpredictable musicality of the company drama is rationalised into a set of six or more thematically distinctive songs, placed at determinate intervals and serving narrative or spectacular functions (voice-over narrative theme song, romantic song, songs of collective labour, folk songs, cabaret songs and so on). In other words there was substantial capitalist assumption of control of the artisanal product and extensive transformation of it by the studio mill.

The transition to a fully autonomous cinematic mode of production was still far away for it depended not only on technical capacities (which were by no means deficient at this time) but also on a completely transformed social milieu. Capitalist production rationality thus prevailed without the capitalist cultural context. This inevitably meant that the cultural product had to retain most of its theatrical characteristics in the commodified forms that capitalist enterprise bestowed on them. Among the assets that capitalist enterprise thus developed out of the theatrical legacy were also the stars, who initially sought the same glory that stage actors vied for.

By around 1950, therefore, the relations between theatre and cinema had been reversed. The facilities were now concentrated in Madras. Theatre companies were breaking down as actors rushed to Madras to find work in the film industry. Others too, musicians, set designers and so on, followed. Over the next six decades, beginning in the early 1950s, these metro-based manufacturing units had achieved complete control over the production process and driven the theatre companies to extinction, but retained the essential core of the stage aesthetic. Developments have been confined to refining, fragmenting and commodifying the same content, rather than a move away from theatricality. It is only very recently, with capitalist ideology becoming more entrenched in India, that we see moves in the direction of an aesthetic transformation that promises, within the next couple of decades, to render the theatre-derived popular film aesthetic irretrievably obsolete. Thus film history in India has followed a unique path: obliged to begin afresh with the advent of sound, cinema entered into a relation of mutual dependency with the cottage industry of the popular stage before arriving at a form of capitalist enterprise without capitalist ideology.

It is a question then of appropriating the theatre's assets rather than overcoming dependence through development of an independent aesthetic base. Fragmentary commodification is thus a result of a situation in which profits depended on exploiting the market for theatre and expanding it by offering various parts of it as separate items of consumption. Music proved the most profitable. Of course we must not forget that in this transformation people from the theatre played as important a role as those who entered the field with a camera in hand for the first time. It is here that the husband-wife entrepreneur teams that flourished in this period provide a striking instance of a business model developed out of the prevailing circumstances.

In the early period of the rise of capitalism as chronicled by Marx and economic historians after him, we are told that in the beginning merchants

sought out skilled craftspeople, gave them raw materials, cash advances, or both, and received delivery of finished goods. The tools of the craft remained in the individual or family's possession and what was sold to the merchant was the finished product: the raw material provided by the merchant transformed by the skilled labour of the artisans into a use value which in the merchant's possession became a bearer of exchange value. This original situation changes step by step: first the merchant, instead of going from one skilled artisan to another, invites them all to work under one roof. The work process and the mode of payment are still the same, but instead of the merchant going to the homes of the artisans he gets them to bring their tools along and sit under one roof in the company of others who are similarly engaged by the merchant. In the second phase, the capitalist, seeking greater control of the production process, acquires the instruments of labour on his own account and now seeks merely the labour of the skilled artisans. They need not bring along their own tools when they come to the manufactory. And so on, until with advanced machinery, the labourer is no longer required to have any of the traditional skills that make his labour valuable. No skills, or new skills that can only be learnt in the factory, are now required. This is how the complete control of the production process by capital is achieved.

When we think of cinema in its relation to the literary world, that is, its reliance on fiction for stories, we have no use for this narrative of capitalist consolidation. At best it could be said that the stories constitute one of the raw materials which go into the production process, and therefore must be paid for. When we consider the relation between the theatre and cinema in the mid-20th century Indian context however, the transition from one to the other begins to look, in its general features if not in its detail, remarkably similar to the earlier history of capitalism. It is then our observation that the capitalist developments in cinema stayed stuck, until very recently, at what I have referred to above as the second phase.

The drama companies were at the height of their popularity when cinema, the new arrival, appeared like a stain on the horizon. Indeed I believe there is another story to be told about how company drama drew towards itself a lot of the talent from the then extant art practices, including the *devadasi/tawaif* tradition, the musicians and singers who were no longer finding patronage in the principalities, other performers like *harikatha* reciters, men and women who lost their symbolic position within orthodox society due to transgressions, misfortunes, etc. As a magnet for such talents facing their own crisis in a time of change, company drama was a powerful cultural force

and many of the publicity strategies that we associate with cinema were already in use to promote their productions. A star system was already in place. Bhanumathi recounts, in her autobiography, a childhood memory of the widespread excitement generated by the announcement of the arrival of a famous actress to the town where her family was then living, a woman called Bhikshavati. Flyers were distributed and carts roamed the streets announcing the programme and singing the praises of the star attraction. All the moral objections that were to be later directed at the cinema were already in circulation against company drama, as is clear from this passage reflecting the views of its author, Vishwanatha Satyanarayana, a conservative Telugu writer, from a novel (of which the concluding portion is set in the 1920s):

> These incapable people of the drama companies have filled the whole country with these unfortunate songs. They have neither good content, nor music nor taste. They go to Bombay and pick up some Parsi tunes. They get someone to write Telugu songs to them. The harmonium and the tabla enhance their effect. They spread across the country. [...] the more vulgar the goings on on stage, the more popular they seem to become. The obscene appearances on stage are the reason for their popularity... [I]n this way the drama companies were looting [people's money].

Whatever the traditional elite thought of it, company drama was a popular and profitable enterprise. In its functioning, however, it still followed the traditional ways: companies were the property of proprietors who were also usually actors and organised and 'directed' the plays. They functioned like large families. Actors developed a reputation over the course of some years, and were associated with the companies they worked for. Movement between companies was prevalent, though it is not clear from when and to what extent. Perhaps increasing competition between companies was giving rise to a situation of competition over resources, of which acting and musical talent were the most prized. On the whole, however, the theatre company was closer to a cottage industry, run by a family, relying for the most part on its own members for labour. It is this model, apparently, that was replicated in the early film studios aptly described by Barnuow and Krishnaswamy as the 'one big family' studios. Nevertheless, it is evident from the few silent films still extant, that the silent cinema had developed a language of its own. Why was this language not able to hold its own when faced with the necessity of including synchronised sound? Were the reasons entirely technical? Or were there social and cultural factors that came in the way?

Notes:

1 Apart from my own scattered readings, I have also relied on the work of Kiranmayi Indraganti, Debashree Mukherjee, Neepa Majumdar, T. J. S. George among others for some of the information that is used here.

2 For a detailed history and analysis of the actor-singer phase of South Indian film music, see Indraganti.

3 Kannamba, and others like her, continued to appear in character roles for a long time after they were displaced by the likes of Savitri in the leading roles.

4 The entire story is engagingly told by T. J. S. George in his biography, *MS: A Life in Music.* George also gives a useful account of the male counterparts of these actor-singers in Tamil—like G. N. Balasubramaniam—whom I have left out of this account.

5 Vennelakanti Subbarao, an early 19th century Interpreter in English Company courts, in a chronicle of his life, writes as follows about the schooling system prevalent in the Madras Presidency then: "In the native schools in this country, boys of all castes are taught as I have already observed; and the only persons of the female sex educated in public schools are the dancing girls, for whom it is indispensably necessary to learn to write and read to enable them to get by heart the songs which they sing out in concerts." (p. 59)

6 For a discussion of the history of stagings of the play *Joymati*, its importance to Assamese national identity, and the film that was made by the great Assamese writer Jyotiprasad Agarwala, see Gaurav Rajkhowa's essay in *Bioscope*.

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