

## BETWEEN PERSONAL CATAclysms AND NATIONAL CONFLICTS

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### BETWEEN PERSONAL CATAclysms AND NATIONAL CONFLICTS: THE MISSING LABOR CLASS IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

In the 1957 national elections in India, ten years after India's independence, the Communist Party of India (CPI) emerged as the largest opposition party to the Indian National Congress, or Congress Party, the political party that won India its independence from Britain. In the same elections, the CPI won an overwhelming victory in the south Indian state of Kerala, launching to power the political career of Communist leader E. M. S. Namboodiripad and his Marxist cabinet. Along with West Bengal and Tripura, Kerala remains one of the three post-independent Indian states whose developmental model for its political and social structures is built on a foundation of Marxist ideology and its popular expression, Communism. While Kerala boasts relatively better living standards, educational and employment opportunities for all its people compared to other Indian states, Kerala also is home to "backward communities" such as Muslims and Ezhavas, and its hundreds of scheduled castes and tribes fighting for equal social and political rights within what is essentially an agrarian-capitalist system. It would not be historically inaccurate to state that the CPI that came into power in 1950s Kerala on a platform of working-class and subaltern solidarity against caste and class exploitation has shifted its political mandate to consolidate gains from capitalism and globalization. For instance, next to Andhra Pradesh, the major cities in Kerala house the largest number of off-shore call-centers for Europe, the U.K., and the U.S., while the land and water rights struggle in the impoverished Northern hills of Kerala has made the area a cauldron of Naxalite (CPI-Marxist/Leninist) insurgencies, with documented and undocumented clashes between civilians and the police a daily occurrence. In this article, the author, a long-time resident of Kerala and the U.S., examines the representations of the working class and the subaltern in select Malayalam movies from 1960-2000; cinema, an offshoot of popular theater and literature in Kerala, played an important part in disseminating Communist ideology from its early times. I contend that working-class and subaltern struggles for equal political, social, and economic rights in Kerala have been contaminated by caste and communal politics, nation-building, and capitalist gains from the globalized Indian market. The dominant aesthetic of the "Left" cinema in Kerala through the last fifty odd years is that of "nostalgia"; in this article, I argue

that nostalgia serves these directors with the formal and narrative containment these films and the society that produces them need to maintain traditional family structures, which ultimately is an endorsement of social status quo. The Left intellectual in Malayalam cinema is ironically enough the existentialist outsider, not the “revolutionary” from the masses that Marx envisioned. The nostalgic Left Malayalam cinema, with very few exceptions, is ungrounded and not in place; it has unfortunately become cinema’s way of saying that “we care,” but only ritualistically.

### “BUYING IN”: FAMILY IS NATION

In his preface to the 1884 edition of *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels hypothesized the historically determined, evolving and materialistic connection between social labor and family structures:

The lower the development of labor and the more limited the amount of its products, and consequently, the more limited also the wealth of the society, the more the social order is found to be dominated by kinship groups. However, within this structure of society based on kinship groups the productivity of labor increasingly develops, and with it private property and exchange, differences of wealth, the possibility of utilizing the labor power of others, and hence the basis of class antagonisms: new social elements, which in the course of generations strive to adapt the old social order to the new conditions, until at last their incompatibility brings about a complete upheaval. In the collision of the newly-developed social classes, the old society founded on kinship groups is broken up; in its place appears a new society, with its control centered in the state, the subordinate units of which are no longer kinship associations, but local associations; a society in which the system of the family is completely dominated by the system of property, and in which there now freely develop those class antagonisms and class struggles that have hitherto formed the content of all *written* history.<sup>1</sup>

Engels’ above postulation that all “written history” bears the burden of “those class antagonisms and class struggles” may be extended to narrative cinema as well, since cinema from its inception has been a powerful medium and document for homogenizing the psychological culture of a people into an awareness of their distinction as individuated subjects and as a nation. Cinema is also the most appropriate artistic form for the monogamous, fam-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/preface.htm>. Accessed December 1, 2010.

ily-oriented capitalist, technologically advanced society in its ability to command multiple labor streams to come together as one, whose metrics for the monetary compensation of its participants is dictated by forces external to its production, and in its potential not only to create an “audience,” but also then to manufacture freely-entered contracts with this audience, which the audience may terminate at any point, much like modern labor contracts or marriage, for that matter. Cinema, in India, in general, has been a product of and process of evidencing modernity, but the “class antagonisms” and “class struggles” identified by Engels above as the documented occupation of history have been replaced in Indian cinema—in so far as cinema is a historical art form in India taking its roots in India through India’s colonial past—as well as its early modern reformist literature (of which cinema is an offshoot) by privileging the gendered subject position over the class subject position. Class-tensions when present are often projected onto gendered-positions in an absolute transference of priorities; women’s empowerment and the voicing of a gendered subject discourse has become the hard-won victory in India’s cultural modernity. The traditional upper caste, upper class Hindu family has been the site of this conflict, resistance and reformation, and “Indian woman” has been its beneficiary, if it is possible at all to see beneficiaries in this scenario, as I will demonstrate through my analysis of select Malayalam films.

Engels’ additional postulation that monogamy will eventually die out as women become equal to men and family as an economic unit will lose its exclusive property-inheritance model in favor of socially distributed systems of child-rearing is pertinent to cinema as well, since social and psychological conceptions of love and man-woman relationships—particularly the power of women to choose their sexual partner freely, often signposted as an assessment of its national culture—form two of the dominant aesthetic and ideological preoccupations of modern societies. How will such a configuration affect Indian cinema? The Family in any of its permutations has been Indian cinema’s salient theme as well as its audience, and Engels’ prophecy behooves us to reconsider cinema’s social function and relevance in the projected absence of family as a cohesive social institution. In this article, I will discuss the political, social and historical uses to which the institution of family has been set in four decades of Malayalam cinema, particularly family as a metonymic replacement device for historical engagement with the dispossessed and the poor in independent India. The family has served not only the nation, but also oppositional ideologies such as the radical Left in India. Such an ideological use of the family by radical politics is particularly interesting, because Malayalam cinema and indeed the state

of Kerala boast a socialist developmental model since India's independence from Britain, with women and minorities enjoying a greater degree of social freedom, economic empowerment and political engagement. I contend that cinematic representation evidences a much different scenario. The radical Left is missing in Malayalam cinema, subsumed under sacrifice, nostalgia, existentialist angst, and in extreme cases violently realized onto the body of the female—the ultimate casualty not only of patriarchy, but also of concomitant capitalism. The failure of the radical Left in Kerala raises a number of important questions regarding the colonial and nationalist contamination of a materialist insurgency waylaid by conflicting personal and traditional special interests.

While Kerala, and India in general, do not subscribe to an American model of capitalist enterprise, it must be pointed out that the same kind of non-coerced exploitation that the employee provides the employer in the U.S. is visible in labor relations in India, primarily through economic and social disciplining of the laboring class through family, class, and caste identities. Class antagonisms and class struggles surface in the Indian context primarily in the form of familial conflicts, with conflict as an end in itself and individuals rarely afforded the opportunity to enter “history” in solidarity with other actors in similar situations, however removed in time and space they may be. While Indian subaltern history is replete with insurgent uprisings led by organic intellectuals working in solidarity with the dispossessed and the exploited, we would be hard pressed to find cinematic evidence of such historical engagement. I contend that such silences are so inscribed within the very form of narrative cinema in India that it cannot help but remain distant from real political engagement.

Perhaps one reason for mainstream Indian cinema's unquestioning acceptance of politico-historical status quo may be attributed to the star-system and genre forms that dominate major Indian studio productions. The melodramatic, star-studded mainstream India cinema has a mutually rewarding relationship with its mass audience. The mainstream genre cinema—extravagant mythological and historical films, action films, dance musicals, social melodramas, family melodramas—remains the closest representation we have of the collective Indian unconscious. In these films, we see the complex Indian ethos striving to find a balance between tradition and modernity, to the almost total exclusion of all other socio-historical forces that pull at the fabric of contemporary Indian society. Mainstream Indian cinema is the clearest expression of Indian modernity, simply through its almost comical repression and simultaneous construction of a latent content whose

acknowledgement, we are led to believe, will undo the very edifice of modernity upon which the notion of independent modern India rests. Furthermore, India's colonial past privileges a crisis of modernity in the "individual"—thus the star-studded family and social melodramas—and not a crisis of conscience rising out of centuries of exploitation of the poor and the dispossessed left over from colonialist class and caste conflicts.

How the empire divided, conquered, engineered, and even manufactured the class and caste antagonisms underlying Indian society is beyond the scope of this article. Here I bring together notes on an aesthetic pattern and an ideological preference that radical Malayalam cinema systematically and consistently demonstrates in its treatment of social injustices. The absence of the laboring class in Malayalam cinema is a crisis of representation as well as a crisis of literacy, both symbolic and literal at one and the same time. In populous and poor developing countries such as India, the masses might never have access to the instruments of literacy—such as reading or writing—to grasp one's history, the entire scope of which may happily be disseminated to you in the course of one afternoon at the local movie theater, to which the great success of propaganda films and the cult of the politician-actor, replete with shrines where the fans pray, can testify in many parts of the country. Engels' postulation also speaks directly to the real "capital" of cultural artifacts, cinema in particular; regardless of the national or international sources of film funding, movies in general capitalize on spectator pleasures, intervening into their lives with an offer of stories that please, that evoke subjective identification, that offer imaginary resolutions to their problems, and through the cinematic narrative offer them a place in history, a face and voice in a document that is at one and the same time something and nothing.

Even with such limited social and historical relevance, cinema remains indeed a medium for the masses in India, for the "unintended city," as Ashish Nandy describes it.<sup>2</sup> India tops the world market in domestic film production with 25 new films produced every week, nearly 1300 movies per year, and with approximately 3000 million viewers watching movies made in one of the sixteen official languages of the country in its nearly 15,000 movie theaters.<sup>3</sup> Hindi films top the production market with nearly 350 films per year, followed closely by Telugu films at 300, and with other

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Featherstone, *Postcolonial Cultures* (University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>3</sup> [http://3.bp.blogspot.com/\\_dtZkYJTYXuc/SkEMnV9-dcl/AAAAAAAAAMc/OZfbQDTm7\\_Q/s1600/h/Attendance\\_Per\\_Capita1.gif](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_dtZkYJTYXuc/SkEMnV9-dcl/AAAAAAAAAMc/OZfbQDTm7_Q/s1600/h/Attendance_Per_Capita1.gif). Accessed December 1, 2010.

regional language films making up the remaining half. Cinema is a hybrid art form drawing not merely its raw materials, but also its modes and inspiration from multiple sources, from folk art, theater, dance, drama, architecture, and sculpture; and in cinema cities such as Chennai or Bombay, or even in the villages in rural India, the film industry, its major studios and its theaters, provide gainful employment to scores of people in electrical contracting, machinery, sound, tailoring, carpentry, painting, catering, transportation, and so forth. Writing in 1969, Indian film critic Chidanand Das Gupta observed, "Only a tiny segment of India lives in the scientific ambience of the twentieth century; the rest is one enormous anachronism struggling to leap into the present."<sup>4</sup> Forty years on, it would not be inaccurate to call the film industry India's most "popular" industry, where even on a weekday the cheapest seats in the movie theaters are completely filled and spilling onto the floor, and the rowdy crowds loudly clap their hands as their beloved heroes appear on screen. Long before box office success and failure are computed by accountants in the big city centers, the Indian audience will let you know if the movie was "paisa vasool" ("worth the money") or not.

As noted above, while movies are big business in India, they also function as a particularly complex and valued form of cultural currency in a country increasingly beleaguered by religious, caste, and ideological conflicts, where the great disparity between wealth and poverty, inequalities in gender, class, caste, and religion, are resolved in aesthetically pleasing packages of song-and-dance routines, melodrama and timely interventions of the *deus ex machina*. While such a structure owes something to particular Indian influences that bear upon the technical medium called cinema, such as theater conventions to take the most obvious influence, it is also worth noting that such older genre conventions are used in modern Indian cinema purely for entertainment, where the incendiary dimensions of cultural conflicts are smoothed over, narratively resolved with hyperbole or repression, the complex social matrices simplified for the sake of happy endings. Successful Indian films by such mainstream standards are formulaic in nature, each formulaic version rendering the cinematic text a different object that valorizes a particular socio-cultural value. One of the criticisms aimed at commercial cinema is mainstream cinema's material disconnect with the living conditions of the mass audience to which it sells its dreams and its stories; affluence is by and large the exception rather than the norm in a populous country as India with its vast middle class and its even vaster lower classes. Writing in 1980, Chidanand Das Gupta observed the

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<sup>4</sup> Chidanand Das Gupta, "Indian Cinema Today," *Film Quarterly* 22.4 (summer 1969): 27.

dearth of socially relevant themes in Indian mainstream movies, a gap conspicuously at odds with the reality of the Indian society:

Imbibing this cream at the top has only hardened the arteries of the mass cinema's social conscience, such as it may have been. The hedonism is complete, and reckless. A third of all the Hindi films of 1978 dealt with themes of crime and revenge and bear the unmistakable impress of James Bond, complete with electronic gadgetry, nubile females and high kicks at the villain's chin in slow motion. Traditional values are still adhered to, but the nod at religion is more perfunctory. Sex and violence count for much, and but for a strict censorship, it would be rampant. In a word, the mass cinema is more escapist than even before.<sup>5</sup>

Cinema thus becomes a ritual object repeatedly consumed by the same participants towards similar repeatedly satisfactory ends, and in this sense bears evidence to the allegorical function of third world art controversially articulated by Fredric Jameson in his polemical essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." A quick inventory of Indian cinema's preoccupations in the 21st century should still make us feel right at home with Das Gupta's above assessment of Indian mainstream cinema's "reckless hedonism." Add to the perennial list of sex, violence, crime, revenge, sexually precocious nubile maidens (if that is possible), sacred motherhood, and technical gadgetry, Indian cinema's new fascination with terrorism, martyrdoms (of the terrorist kind), and Non-Resident Indians—there we have Indian cinema in the 21st century.

Perhaps the strongest endorsement of Indian popular cinema as well as its allegorical nature comes from one of its superstars, Amitabh Bachchan:

Really, it is a golden period for the film industry, but it is also linked to the fate of the nation, as it has been for some peculiar reason for the past 30 years...Everything looks good, burnished with gold, so Indian films automatically look wonderful. From being an embarrassment, running around trees has become a cult statement.

It is not we who have changed, it is the people who are looking at us who have. It could be at Deauville in France or at Marrakesh in Morocco, or anywhere else for that matter, the world has decided to take our movies to heart.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chidanand Das Gupta, "New Directions in Indian Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 34.1 (autumn 1980): 33.

<sup>6</sup> Amitabh Bachchan, "People First," *India Today*, Special Issue, January 5, 2004.

Such a candid and confident assessment of contemporary Indian cinema's ability to be a reliable source of visual and auditory pleasure does not, however, imply that the ideological level of the popular cinema narrative is beyond critical investigation in India. Film critic and author Ravi Vasudevan, for instance, has observed that since the 1970s, the *Economic and Political Weekly of India*, a left-wing intellectual and scholarly forum for disciplinary analyses has considered film "a vivid, highly public and politically immediate document [...] popular film is treated as an entry point for understanding the legitimization of social and political power through narrative forms commanding the widest of social constituencies."<sup>7</sup> Though Das Gupta has observed that the art-house cinema was artificially created in India to compensate for commercial cinema's lack of social content,<sup>8</sup> we might say that the development of what has come to be called "Parallel Cinema" or "Art Film" in India is consistent with the critical recognition of cinema as an intellectual and aesthetic medium by Indian audience, writers, thinkers, artists, and entrepreneurs. Parallel Cinema is often juxtaposed against popular cinema, whose relevance and salience for any Indian film history have been persuasively argued for by noted Indian sociologist and cultural commentator Ashish Nandy: "The Indian commercial cinema, to be viable must try to span the host of cultural diversities and epochs the society lives with and that effort has a logic of its own."<sup>9</sup> Nandy contends that this much-needed logic does not lie in art or parallel cinema or its conventions of realism or polemic, but in fantasy and melodrama. Realism is the common denominator between Indian art films and Indian reformist literature of the sixties, with many well-known directors looking to India's reformist literature for story-ideas while looking to the west, particularly the French New Wave and avant-garde, the Russian montage and collage techniques, for form and structure.

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<sup>7</sup> Ravi Vasudevan, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Das Gupta, "New Directions in Indian Cinema," 36.

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. Featherstone 104.

## THE WANNA-BE MARTYR AS THE RADICAL: MALAYALAM CINEMA AND THE CRISIS OF THE LEFT IMAGINATION

Reformist literature and its offshoot, the literary film, had a particular groundswell in the south Indian state of Kerala. A coastal state with a largely agrarian feudal economy and no industries to speak of, Kerala, along with West Bengal and Tripura, is one of the three states in independent India where the opposition Communist Party of India (CPI) has tied with the Indian National Congress as the First party or the leading oppositional party since independence. Along with the Congress Party, Bharatiya Janata Party, and Muslim League, the Communist Party continues to be a major and powerful political presence in Kerala, in or out of office. Kerala is demographically diverse, with three major religions—Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam—and many different sub-castes clustering around them. Hindus form 56.2% of the total population of Kerala, with Islam at 24.7% and Christianity at 19%. Dalits (scheduled Hindu castes) and Adivasis (literally “the first people”), scheduled tribes or the indigenous tribal groups at the lowest rungs of the Hindu caste system, are concentrated in the eastern parts of the state and considered “untouchable.” It is instructive that in the 1968 census, the Adivasis were listed at 9% of the population,<sup>10</sup> while in 2001, their total number figured at 1.1% of the total population.<sup>11</sup> Kerala itself constitutes 3.44% of India’s total population. The scheduled castes (Harijan) and tribes (Girijan) in Kerala, who are at the bottom of the caste system, experience severe social discrimination with complicated codes of ritual and distance pollution: members of these Harijan and Girijan castes and tribes are not allowed to come within a certain distance of the upper castes. Members of the scheduled castes traditionally worked the fields of upper caste Hindus (and Christians) for subsistence wages as bonded laborers. They had no right to own fields or lands. Scheduled tribes that are primarily hunter-gatherer tribes were criminalized during India’s colonial times by the British administration; independent India has followed suit. Anyone can arrest them or kill them with no questions asked. In *Imaginary Maps*, tribal activist and writer Mahasweta Devi has described the destiny of these original inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent thusly:

Have you ever seen them, very carefully going very respectfully in file? If a thousand Indian tribals, men, women, and children sit,

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<sup>10</sup> Prema Kurien, “Colonialism and Ethnogenesis: A Study of Kerala, India,” *Theory and Society* 23.3 (June 1994): 394.

<sup>11</sup> [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerala](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerala). Accessed December 1, 2010.

how quiet they are? How quietly they listen to people? Mainstream people cannot believe it. They shove and nudge, they hum and sing, they whisper. It is not in us. In their blood there is so much patience, it is like nature. Patience of the hills, of the rivers, the tribal contains everything. Each tribe is like a continent. But we never tried to know them. Never tried to respect them. This is true of every tribal. We destroyed them...As far as the tribal is concerned, the road, the big road, is the enemy. It will take away whatever crop he grows, whatever vegetable he grows, and in times of famine and natural disorders like rain failure or flood they will come in lorries and trucks and take away their children to be sold in other places as bonded labour...In the capitalist market there is great demand for children, especially tribal children. You pay them little; you can starve them; you can kill them; no one will come for them.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically enough, Malayalam cinema's social record commences with *Neelakuyil* ("The Blue Cuckoo," 1954), which told the story of a Harijan girl, Neeli, who is seduced and abandoned when she becomes pregnant by an upper caste Nair man. Ashamed and homeless, Neeli commits suicide by putting her head on the rail tracks, leaving her newborn child beside her. The child is rescued and brought up by an upper caste Hindu. The drama resolves as the biological father, who is married but childless, learns to overcome his caste aversion towards his illegitimate child and eventually adopts the child as his own. Director Ramu Kariat adapted the story from a novel of the same name by one of Kerala's progressive novelists, Uroob, who wrote the screenplay for the movie version as well. *Neelakuyil* won the President's silver medal for best movie and best direction in 1954 and laid the groundwork for a host of socially oriented films throughout the sixties. These movies addressed various social injustices, from untouchability and pollution to the entrapment of women in arranged marriages, the breakdown of the Nair joint family, mistreatment of the mentally disabled, and exploitation of the poor and the dispossessed. This progressive and reformist turn in Malayalam cinema was ably assisted by the progressive literary movement which boasted such radical writers as Thoppil Bhasi, whose 1952 play, *Ningalenne Communistakki* ("You Have Made Me a Communist"), made social history in Kerala with its year-long performances; Vaikom Mohammad Basheer, one of the most progressive Malayalam novelists from the Muslim community, who wrote openly about oppressive Islamic practices, particularly as they apply to women, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, who popularized a particularly seductive and sophisticated genre of Hindu family

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<sup>12</sup> Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps*, trans. and intro. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Calcutta: Thema, 2001), xv.

and social melodramas, to name a few of these early titans of reformist Malayalam literature.

Cinema also joined hands with the active theater scene in Kerala, in particular, the Kerala People's Arts Club, known as KPAC, a left-wing political drama cooperative founded in Kerala during the 1950s. KPAC productions directly intervened in Kerala's social and cultural contexts; their second drama, the mentioned, *Ningalenne Communistakki*, permeated both Kerala's theater as well as its burgeoning movie industry with heavy left-themed productions. The hugely successful play was made into a movie in 1970 starring Malayalam cinema's superstars, Prem Nazir and Sheela, with the film's box office success secondary to the flamboyant popularity of its revolutionary songs. *Ningalenne Communistakki* revolved around the gradual ideological conversion of a conservative older man, Paramu Pillai, into communist sympathizer fighting against feudal values. Its anti-feudal stance was considered radically provocative for its time, and the Kerala government banned it under the Dramatic Performance Act, alleging that it instigated people to rebel against the government. KPAC continued with its staging against the government ban, and to this day it remains one of Malayalam's longest running productions, with over 1000 stagings recorded in its itinerant schedule across the state. Anecdotal praise for the drama confers it the honor of having propelled the election of the first Communist ministry of E. M. S. Namboodiripad in 1957.

It is possible to read the gradual conversion of Paramu Pillai into a revolutionary as an organic process, and Paramu Pillai as an organic intellectual face-to-face with the need to establish his solidarity, with the hapless laboring class systematically intimidated by the feudal landlord, Kesavan Nair. However, this political engagement is engineered through a family melodrama; Paramu Pillai becomes a communist activist only after his son, Gopalan, and his friend, Matthew, both educated young men from the upper Hindu and Christian communities and trade union workers, become victims of the feudal landlord's violent assault for organizing the village people, particularly its laboring class made up largely of Harijans and relatively poorer upper caste Hindus against Kesavan Nair's agenda to take over arable land in the village, parcel by parcel, by threat and assault. The older man's ideological conversion—siding with the poor and the dispossessed against feudal values—is brought on by a parental crisis. Solidarity with the subsistence poor is presented as a delayed generational epiphany brought about by a loving father's awareness that he stands to lose his only son; thus the transitive force and import of the title.

Similarly, in *Neelakuyil*, the evils of “untouchability” and caste exclusion/pollution are superseded only by the melodramatic constraint that the child’s biological father is childless with his caste wife, while the child he fathered with the woman outside of his caste lays unclaimed by his paternity. Other than the fact that Neeli, the abandoned young woman, is a Harijan, we do not see or hear other Harijan characters in *Neelakuyil*; the social realism that permeates the theme of caste barriers in Kerala is presented onscreen as a family melodrama in which the irresponsible father is finally made to acknowledge his offspring and paternity. In his *Origin of Family*, Engels notes that in both Catholic and Protestant Europe, monogamous marriage did not involve individual sex-love, and that individual sex-love born out of mutual inclination between a man and woman (Engels limits his discussion to heterosexual unions and heterosexual families) happened outside of the marriage, in what would be considered adulterous relationships:

But if monogamy was the only one of all the known forms of the family through which modern sex-love could develop, that does not mean that within monogamy modern sexual love developed exclusively or even chiefly as the love of husband and wife for each other. That was precluded by the very nature of strictly monogamous marriage under the rule of the man. Among all historically active classes—that is, among all ruling classes—matrimony remained what it had been since the pairing marriage, a matter of convenience which was arranged by the parents. The first historical form of sexual love as passion, a passion recognized as natural to all human beings (at least if they belonged to the ruling classes), and as the highest form of the sexual impulse—and that is what constitutes its specific character—this first form of individual sexual love, the chivalrous love of the middle ages, was by no means conjugal. Quite the contrary. In its classic form among the Provençals, it heads straight for adultery, and the poets of love celebrated adultery.<sup>13</sup>

Engels also notes that, historically, the constraint of “arranged marriages” affected the upper classes more than it did the lower classes, where marriage by mutual inclination and individual sex-love was practiced to a greater extent, where women had greater freedom of choice of their sexual partner. For then, there is no other motive left except mutual inclination. Even though set in a categorically different ethos than Engels’ test societies of Europe, Greece and Rome, ironically enough we see this readiness and forwardness to choose her sexual partner in the Harijan girl, Neeli, who of

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch02d.htm>. Accessed December 1, 2010.

course is punished for this initiative by being seduced, abandoned, and eventually left to die in order to restore the social status quo. For instance, it is Neeli who is the fertile woman with whom the upper caste man falls in love. His own caste wife is a model of chastity and virtue, albeit childless. When the upper caste father accepts his low-born child and integrates the child into his caste society as his child with all vestiges of the child's maternity erased through her death, we are reassured that romantic love survives in extra-marital pockets of the society, but that only the upper castes can enjoy the benefits of romantic love and still maintain their exclusive caste-based ethos. Thus these early socialist melodramas, which dared to touch upon such incendiary topics as caste pollution, have their radical potential relatively domesticated. Early socialist melodramas such as *Neelakuyil* hint at the anxieties surrounding the dissolution of the patriarchal monogamous family, but this is repressed content. The anxiety over the dissolution of the family resurfaces in plots involving caste barriers and individual love, which has to be "sacrificed" so that the social status quo might remain unchanged, indeed unchallenged.

"Sacrifice" becomes the definition of the word "capital" itself in another immensely popular movie *Mooladhanam* (1969), which once again is a socialist melodrama centered around two radical friends and labor organizers: Ravi, an upper caste Hindu, and Mammootty, a Muslim, who incur the wrath of the state for their incendiary agitations to end Diwan's rule in Kerala. Set during the 1944-1946 communist-led upheaval to end Diwan Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer's "American model of Executive power" in the state of Travancore (as Kerala was known then), *Mooladhanam* opens with Ravi and Mammootty teaching a "study class" to a group of low-caste laborers about the meaning of the word "mooladhanam." In Malayalam, the word literally means "capital." Ravi, however, teaches the audience that in order for them to have jobs, wages, and freedom, the only "capital" they have is "sacrifice"—willing sacrifice of all they have for the sake of the nation. The Malayalam word for "sacrifice" is "thyagam," and in this catachrestic conflation of "capital" with "sacrifice" we find a metaphysical interpellation controlling a materialist discourse.

Indeed the word "sacrifice," with its mystical and religious undertones, has become a star-studded vehicle for the representation of radical ideology in Malayalam cinema. The "sacrifice" story is essentially the story of an individual, not a collective. The revolutionary is acutely conscious of his awareness of his difference from society: he is an outsider, his devotion to his cause alienates him from the rest of the society. Fearless to the end, the radical

revolutionary dies for the cause, a martyr. Or, conversely, the revolutionary recognizes the futility of his mission, yet he goes on, almost in the manner of the mythical Sisyphus pushing the stone endlessly up the hill, because it is in his nature. In Malayalam cinema, traditionally, this individual, man or woman with infinite capacity for reflection and action, is usually an upper-caste Hindu working for the low-born labor class or the deeply oppressed Adivasis or tribals in the northeastern hills of Kerala.

While *Mooladhanam* is markedly different from later incarnations of the sacrifice genre, it nevertheless foregrounds certain fundamental contradictions in the representation of the “Left” movement in Kerala. In keeping with the socialist melodrama genre, *Mooladhanam* pits radical activism against the family. When Ravi and Mammootty go into hiding to escape from the police, Ravi leaves behind a loving wife with two young children, and Mammootty, his five-day-old, brand new bride. Except for the first study class, where we meet an anonymous mass of the laboring class, once Ravi’s story of exile and return is set in motion, we hardly see the victims of class conflict onscreen anymore. The plot thickens with the introduction of Madhu, a conniving and lecherous friend attempting to seduce Ravi’s virtuous wife, Sarada, who resists as much and as long as possible, but when her young son is implicated in a false charge and arrested, she has no resort but to succumb to Madhu’s lecherous embrace to free the young boy. “You can take my unfeeling body and do with it as you please,” Sarada tells Madhu. In keeping with the censor guidelines of 1969, we see a vulture or a hawk mangling an unidentifiable animal violently on the ground. The plot complications are resolved when both Ravi and Mammootty secure their freedom and Ravi comes out of hiding and Mammootty is released from jail to return to the bosom of their families.

Much like in *Neelakuyil*, we find that the supreme “sacrifice” for the cause of resolving class conflict has been endured by the virtuous woman Sarada. The young son for whom she compromised her virtue calls her a “bad” woman. Ravi, upon hearing this, immediately casts her out; indeed Sarada herself confesses her soiled and fallen status and offers to leave the family. Patriarchal and monogamous family values are once again cemented in the final scene, in which Ravi “forgives” Sarada for her supreme “sacrifice.” She faints in his arms. Or does she die? We do not know. The movie ends there. Both Nabeesa, Mammootty’s new wife, and Sarada demonstrate considerable drive to protect their families and assist the cause in the absence of their husbands, but both women are punished by society for their initiatives—Sarada through her rape, and Nabeesa through her experience of guilt for having

“lost” Sarada’s children while the latter is arrested and sent to jail for refusing to reveal Ravi’s whereabouts. Nabeesa’s punishment is her guilt over her lack of maternal care for the young children. Despite the revolutionary songs, the “socialist” in these early socialist melodramas does not demonstrate solidarity with the poor and the dispossessed. In fact, these movies are anxious negotiations of the social role and power of women in Kerala.

*Mooladhanam* decisively inaugurated this metonymic link between women and the proletarian minority. While both groups are victims of capitalist exploitation, it is evident in Malayalam cinema that the society will tolerate the eventual emancipation of women. Just as we never see the laboring class on whose behalf the plot conflicts in the movie ostensibly unravels, the trend in mainstream Malayalam cinema has been to reconfigure such class-based social conflicts as gender conflicts. Indian cinema, by and large, follows the traditional sequestering of genders both at home and in the public; women are devoted mothers, obedient daughters, and, once again, devoted and sexually pure wives and romantic interests who are distinct from “vamps,” or a decadent westernized woman, usually of the Christian faith, more specifically the mixed Anglo-Indian class. Though women’s entry into modernity is thus equated with a particular form of westernized and non-Hindu decadence, over the years, Indian cinema, despite its pornographic exploitation of women onscreen has made small but significant concessions to the production of women not as mere objects of voyeuristic male fantasies. These advances may be seen both in the changing representation of women characters onscreen as well as in the small but rising number of women directors who have brought to Indian cinema a particularly refreshing engagement with gender issues in Indian society. While women directors such as Aparna Sen in Bengal, and Sai Paranjape and Kalpana Lajmi in Maharashtra work predominantly on women-oriented themes and tackle social issues such as marital violence, prostitution, and adultery, even these films stay within the confines of the acceptable feminine aspects of an Indian ethos by and large defined from a male viewpoint. Neither these directors nor their male counterparts address inequities of caste and religion through narrative cinema with any singularity or significant depth, however. The laboring class, the subaltern remains voiceless and faceless. It is particularly significant that a Malayalam cinema that boasts considerable female star-power has yet to make room for a woman director; Malayalam cinema, both onscreen and behind-the-scenes, remains almost exclusively male-dominated with minor but significant exceptions, such as the nationally respected editing work of Bina Venugopal.

In this respect, John Abraham's *Amma Ariyan* ("Report to Mother," 1986) is an interestingly different movie, perhaps one that offers an alternate paradigm for dealing with issues of non-representation of the labor class in Malayalam cinema, as well as for recomplicating the metonymic ties between gender and class. In *Amma Ariyan*, the titular female character is already an old woman whose son has committed suicide (killed by the state police?) for his alleged involvement in Naxalite activities. *Amma Ariyan* is Malayalam's first fully people-financed movie. Abraham and his collective, a cinema cooperative called Odessa Collective, traveled the length and breadth of the state screening Chaplin's *Kid* for public viewing and taking donations from the public. *Amma Ariyan* was made with those funds. In an interesting departure from the socialist melodramas and left-martyr movies, *Amma Ariyan* is a bonafide product of the Indian avant-garde. Shot in black and white almost in documentary format, loosely structured with a skimpy narrative line interspersed with interviews and footage of Left strikes and public protests, *Amma Ariyan* is in the form of a cinematic letter from young Purushan ("man" in Malayalam) to his mother informing her of his whereabouts. Purushan on way from his village to the Indian capital city of Delhi happens upon a dead body, which he suspects belongs to his friend, Hari, a musician, drummer, and radical activist. The movie itself has a perambulatory structure, following Purushan around as he locates more and more friends of Hari, all the while narrating what he does in the form of a letter to his mother, until at last a small crowd of young men shows up at Hari's house to inform Hari's mother of the death of her son. Purushan's perambulations takes the audience to the margins of the society, where the camera usually does not go. For instance, we hear from a group of migrant workers from the neighboring state of Tamilnad working at a quarry; one worker fell from the rocks and lost both of his legs; the contractor refused to compensate him for his injuries, and all the quarry workers united in a strike. Such moments, extraneous to the narrative frame, invest the diegesis with a historical urgency, an urgency to narrate symbolically the real, to fictionalize and narrate so that the imaginary becomes an episteme, an object of knowledge, and thus an agent of activism. *Amma Ariyan* offers no solutions to the problem of class exploitation, but in its reluctance to foreground a narrated subject on screen, its refreshing use of interviews and voice of the people, *Amma Ariyan* does abide on the side of the exploited, the tortured, and the murdered.

*Amma Ariyan*, however, is the exception rather than the norm. Historically, the radical intellectual in Malayalam cinema remains the wanna-be martyr. *Panchagni* ("The Five Fires," 1986), scripted by eminent Malayalam novelist

and director M. T. Vasudevan Nair and directed by Hariharan, once again equates revolutionary activism with sacrifice—gender sacrifice at that. Indira, a former radical Naxalite activist serving time in jail for murder, secures a two-week parole to visit her dying mother, a nationalist fighter from the days of Indian independence. Like the other well-born young radicals we have met so far, Indira had also led and participated in the violent killing of a rapacious land-owner who seduced and abandoned a tribal girl in the Vayanad hills. When Indira's job as a welfare officer takes the tribal girl and her father to the landowner's estate, stating that he needs to acknowledge his paternity, the landowner sets a pack of dogs on the pregnant tribal girl and her father, both of whom are subsequently torn to death. Even with such gory and sensationalist violence meted out to the female body in the name of documenting historical wrongs done to the dispossessed, *Panchagni* does portray the female consciousness at the cusp of a radical but thwarted rebirth in the character of Sarada, Indira's friend married to a crude estate owner and womanizer. Once again, *Panchagni* recasts the impetus for solidarity with the dispossessed as solidarity with the other oppressed class in a patriarchy, women. Where the cinema text becomes a genuine object of knowledge for the viewer is in the scenes between Indira and Sarada, in which Indira learns of her friend's decaying marriage. However, Indira, rather than assist in Sarada's evolution into an organic intellectual taking charge of her own empowerment, ends up murdering Sarada's husband as he and his friends gang-rape the young maid-servant in the house. Indira, the radical activist, once again becomes a martyr and goes back to prison, this time forever. The Naxalite movement which nurtured her activism and its ostensible cause—the empowerment of the tribals—become the silenced content in the movie.

Political resistance to social injustice and one's work in that cause become indistinguishable from an existential wound in Rajiv Vijayraghavan's *Margam* ("The Path," 2003) which narrates the story of Venukumara Menon, a leader of the radical Left movement in the 60s and 70s in North Kerala who gradually slips into a form of disengagement and withdrawal from the world, concealing a weighty guilt within himself. This tightly scripted and memorably acted, substantive feature film focuses its attention on the (failed) radical Left movement in Kerala in the dawn of the state's triumphant emergence into free market capitalism and its partaking of the gains of globalization. Menon, we discover at the outset of the movie, harbors a weighty grief and guilt over his role—not clearly specified in the movie—in the death of one of his revolutionary friends, Joy, who was killed in a violent confrontation between Naxalites and the state police in North

Kerala. We also learn that Menon has since married Joy's sister Elizabeth, and that they have two teenaged children, a son who is away at college, and a daughter who is at home. The movie is narrated primarily through the point-of-view of the daughter, who alone perceives her father's gradual and persistent melancholy and eventual mental breakdown. The loving and supportive relationship between the father and the daughter (who is more like a mother to the aging man) is played with careful lightheartedness by the daughter and labored normalcy by the father, with a significant amount of screen time given over to what cannot be shown—the repressed memories—obliquely surfacing in the many scenes where Menon sleeps or looks through old newspaper clippings. Dogged by a persistent melancholy, Menon cannot engage with his loving family at all. In her work on "Resistance literature," Barbara Harlow quotes the Palestinian novelist, Sahar Khalifeh, who describes her move from existentialism to Marxism:

You see, being a Marxist you have to sacrifice certain things; as a privileged individual related to the privileged class, the luxury of having thoughts and not having to carry them into reality. A characteristic of the individualists, of the existentialists, is that when trying to solve problems, they go ahead and then when they face a very, very big problem, which needs a lot of effort not for the individual himself, but for a community, a communal effort, they stop and cannot continue. They make instead this spiritual leap: they either solve it by going back to religion, the supernatural, or find it absurd. They are aware that the individual, if he is a genius, can solve many problems; but as an individual he cannot solve big, big social problems.<sup>14</sup>

That Menon's melancholy is tainted with feelings of guilt over his betrayal of the "party" and his comrades is driven home to us in scenes in which an old party worker walks away from him at a coffee shop and in which the aging mother of a dead comrade silently rejects his friendly overtures at reestablishing social contact. Menon is a pariah of the Left. The film switches from the daughter's solicitous observation of her father's breakdown into a quasi-satirical point-of-view when Menon decides that he will indeed ask for his share of his family inheritance and "invest" it for the future of his wife and children. The movie violently repudiates the radical actions of the Left in a scene in which Menon wonders about whose version of history gets told: the melancholic, guilt-ridden, and confessional quality of his outbursts are calculated to evoke our sympathy with his deterioration. Menon's frenetic monologue in this scene clearly presents history as a text with "versions";

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<sup>14</sup> Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London & New York: Methuen, 1987), 165-166.

Menon would like to remove himself from one text—the Left text of his past—and reinscribe himself within the text of traditional family values, with its tongue-in-cheek participation in globalization's gains. His ironic comments about "investments" and his ancestral share in the family property are ultimately self-serving; not only do they consolidate real material wealth within the diegetic context, but they also eclipse and efface the specters of Naxalite losses from the annals of a failed insurgency. In contrast to violent projections of class conflict onto the body of a woman, in *Margam*, the silent subaltern class on whose behalf the radicals fought surfaces as a psychic wound on the male body. The movie ends with an ambiguous scene with two characters, the daughter and the father, sitting on a hillside, their distant and small human figures embedded within the landscape, while the fable of a bird that tried to put out a fire by dipping its wings in a lake and shaking the few drops of water on the fire is narrated in a voice-over; it could be the daughter's voice, but we are not sure. Seeing the bird's puny efforts against the mighty fire, the God of clouds asks the bird why: "Why try to put out this huge fire when you know you can't?" The bird replies, "You are the God of rain and thunder and you are not putting out the fire. That is your prerogative. This is mine. This little effort is mine." This metaphysical parable appears to provide a belated existential rationalization to the continuing presence of radical imagination in the Left cinema. Ironically, the Left intellectual works not as an agent of historical struggle but as an autonomous individual staking out a karmic path for himself, albeit for a lost cause—small bird, big fire.

The orientation of this scene is deliberately disconnected from the diegetic setting. The events in the plot take place in two locations; one, Menon's apartment in Trivandrum city, and the other, his ancestral home somewhere in a North Kerala village. The last scene chronologically should happen after Menon's breakdown, when he comes back to his apartment in the city after visiting his ancestral home to participate in his mother's anniversary funeral rites. And yet the final scene seems to be embedded in that distant village, almost like a memory, perhaps like a dream for the future. The Marxist revolutionary has left the masses, or the masses have rejected him, and his political engagements are no longer the result of communal solidarity, but a freely entered existential choice. One hesitates to ponder the material consequences of such sentimental narrativization of a collective struggle, but it does behoove the question: What is the radical Left's impetus for social revisioning within India's current globalized developmental model?

Malayalam Left cinema over the years, in its mainstream as well as art house forms, has evolved the myth of the radical individual as someone essentially different and set apart from the humanity he serves. This set-apartness of the radical intellectual has dictated the forms of Left cinema; narratives of heroes and heroines who fight and then nostalgically resign or turn themselves into martyrs when the fight becomes too overwhelming, as all structural changes to society fundamentally tend to be. The spectral gap at the center of these Left films speaks of the radical intelligentsia's unwillingness to be something more than the intellectual mentors to the subaltern classes. It is particularly instructive at this juncture for Marxist intellectuals to listen to the words of a subaltern intellectual. In her translator's preface to Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*, Gayatri Spivak observes that "the organic intellectual is not a concept of identity but rather of a focus on that part of the subject which focuses on the intellectual's function."<sup>15</sup> Spivak calls this function a "secret encounter," or "the ethics of the impossible," positioning the radical intellectual as a site of ongoing solidarity with ethical struggles rather than a vested state of being:

This encounter can only happen when the respondents inhabit something like normality. Most political movements fail in the long run because of the absence of this engagement. In fact, it is impossible for all leaders (subaltern or otherwise) to engage every subaltern in this way, especially across the gender divide. This is why ethics is the experience of the impossible...This understanding only sharpens the sense of the crucial and continuing need for collective political struggle. For a collective struggle supplemented by the impossibility of full ethical engagement—not in the rationalist sense of "doing the right thing," but in the more familiar sense of the impossibility of "love" in the one-on-one way for each human being—the future is always around the corner, there is no victory, but only victories that are also warnings.<sup>16</sup>

The historically inscribed familial love produces itself as the true object of knowledge in Malayalam Left cinema from *Mooladhanam* to *Margam*. The future of an authentic Left cinema lies in acknowledging the limits of this familial love and supplementing it with the collective imaginary.

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<sup>15</sup> Devi, *Imaginary Maps*, xxiii.

<sup>16</sup> Devi, xx.

## SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

*Neelakuyil [The Blue Cuckoo]* (Ramu Kariat, 1954)

*Mooladhanam [The Capital]* (P. Bhaskaran, 1969)

*Ningalenne Communistakki [You Have Made Me a Communist]* (Thoppil Bhasi, 1970)

*Panchagni [The Five Fires]* (Hariharan, 1986)

*Amma Ariyan [Report to Mother]* (John Abraham, 1986)

*Margam [The Path]* (Rajiv Vijayraghavan, 2003)