Managing the Crisis: Bharateeyudu and the Ambivalence of being 'Indian'

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Abstract
In the spectacular spaces carved out by recent South Indian commercial cinema, we are beginning to notice a certain proliferation of popular idioms dealing with political questions, a phenomenon that demands to be seen as part of attempts in different realms to 'manage' the crises of our times. One of the commonest names for the interconnected processes that are transforming our society, the name that at least for some is also a signifier for contemporary crises, is liberalization. We would like to suggest that the term is popularly used not only to refer to the actual economic changes being wrought in India, but also to index something more diffuse: the new ways of life which are emerging and the elaborate discursive procedures that endorse and perpetuate them.

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Managing the Crisis: Bharateeyudu and the Ambivalence of being ‘Indian’

In the spectacular spaces carved out by recent South Indian commercial cinema, we are beginning to notice a certain proliferation of popular idioms dealing with political questions, a phenomenon that demands to be seen as part of attempts in different realms to ‘manage’ the crises of our times. One of the commonest names for the interconnected processes that are transforming our society, the name that at least for some is also a signifier for contemporary crises, is liberalization. We would like to suggest that the term is popularly used not only to refer to the actual economic changes being wrought in India, but also to index something more diffuse: the new ways of life which are emerging and the elaborate discursive procedures that endorse and perpetuate them.

It is perhaps because of their direct and innovative engagement with the present that the films of Shankar and Maniratnam have acquired a following that goes beyond the traditional ‘class’ audience, coming to include many of the average moviegoers (the ‘mass’ audience) that throng to the films of Chiranjeevi and Rajnikant. Clearly, Maniratnam’s Roja (1992) and Bombay (1995), and Shankar’s Kaadalan/Premikudu (1994) and now Indian/Bharateeyudu (1996) all attempt to articulate contemporary anxieties in the realm of the popular in ways that have successfully appealed to heterogeneous audiences. However, we would not want to argue that these two filmmakers deploy the same sort of cinematic idiom or occupy the same ideological spaces, although one finds in Shankar’s films a constant intertextual polemic with Maniratnam. As we have suggested elsewhere, the former come as it were into the techno-aesthetic space created by the Maniratnam films but extend their signifying range in unpredictable directions. Similarly, in Shankar’s Premikudu or Bharateeyudu we do not find the sort of relentless celebration of the new middle class that we have come to expect in Maniratnam’s films. Instead, although the former do represent ‘liberalized’ spaces, they employ modes of representation that ironize, and dislodge the iconicity of such spaces, as in Premikudu, or render our responses to them ambivalent, as Bharateeyudu does.

Bharateeyudu has none of the consumerist euphoria and gaiety of
Premikudu; and, in spite of the elaborately choreographed song sequences, the dominant note is sombre, even menacing. It is possible to read the film as an apologia for liberalization, or rather as an argument for the need to achieve that state. But to do so, we think, is to miss the point altogether. Bharateeyudu, in our opinion, demonstrates unequivocally that something is indeed wrong with our liberalized or liberalizing present, that the situation requires re-evaluation and intervention. In its response to liberalization, the film seems to mobilize and re-focus contemporary anxieties about the transformatory processes in which we are all participating. This paper attempts to investigate the construction of commonsense in the film and its architecture of consent/implication. Starring Kamalahasan in two roles, father Senapati and son ‘Chandu’ – Chandra Bose, named after his father’s commander-in-chief in the Indian National Army (INA), the film also has three significant female figures: Amritavalli, freedom fighter and Chandu’s mother, played by Sukanya; and Ishwarya and Swapna, the two women interested in Chandu, played by well-known Hindi stars Manisha Koirala and Urmila Matondkar respectively.

Bharateeyudu revolves around the conflict between Senapati and Chandu, although the fact that they are related is not revealed to us until after the intermission, in the second of the film’s two long flashback sequences. The sequence in which we realize the protagonists are father and son is also the sequence which suggests to us that they are in conflict. Senapati catches Chandu trying to get his sister to forge their father’s signature on a cheque. Chandu says he needs the money to bribe his way to a job, and is admonished by his father: ‘You should have studied harder and obtained better marks.’ Senapati also rejects Chandu’s suggestion that he should use the freedom fighter’s quota to get the latter a seat in a medical or engineering college: ‘That is meant for poor freedom fighters’ children.’ He advises his son to give up his dream of getting a city job and become a farmer too, but Chandu wants to be ‘modern’, and not ‘remain in the 1940s’ like his father who, he declares, belongs in a museum. So Chandu leaves home for the city, and becomes a tout in the Regional Transport Office, later bribing his way to the job of a brake inspector.

Bribery or ‘corruption’ is the central theme of the film. Its pervasiveness in our present is what, according to Senapati, is destroying the nation. After he has lost his only daughter because of his refusal to pay bribes to a doctor, a police officer and a Village Administrative Officer, he decides to uproot ‘the weed of corruption’ by deploying the skills he learned during his INA days. Not all his victims, however, are those who have personally harmed him. Indeed, the film opens with the killing of a municipal commissioner with whom Senapati has no direct link, and who mistakes the old man for a courier he was expecting with a bribe.

For a film which characterizes the present as degenerate, the past
necessarily stands as a point of contrast. Interestingly, it is only the pre-independence past which provides this contrast: the first long flashback, in black and white to create the effect of verisimilitude, narrates the heroic actions of Amritavalli and Senapati during the freedom struggle. The woman is seen as engaging in two major acts of defiance – refusing to salute the British flag, and leading a group of women who are burning foreign cloth. Senapati, on the other hand, is shown killing both the British officer who beats Amritavalli for not saluting the flag, and the other officer who orders the disrobing of the swadeshi women who are consequently driven to suicide. The image of ritualistic killing dominates the nationalist struggle flashback as much as it does the real-time story of the film.

Rewriting Nationalist History

Part of the project of the film, we suggest, is to rewrite the story of nationalist struggle in such a way as to condemn the present as well as indicate what it will take to transform it. In this rewriting, the iconic figures of Gandhi and Nehru are replaced by Subhas Chandra Bose. Bose is in fact the only nationalist leader prominently shown in the flashback, in documentary footage into which the film’s Senapati is inserted. While Gandhi is completely absent, Nehru appears only fleetingly, again in news footage and in a corner of the frame, his voice uttering the famous speech: ‘At the stroke of the midnight hour ...’ Except for two brief shots of Congress activists just before the fragment of the Nehru speech, the only other freedom fighters shown in the flashback are those seen going off to join the INA and then later taking part in INA activities. Sacrifice and heroism thus appear as the supreme qualities of Bose’s followers, who end up being marginalized in the actual transfer of power.

The film does acknowledge, however, that the freedom struggle was not simply a single unified movement. Amritavalli asks the CBI officer Krishnaswami who comes to Senapati’s house posing as a freedom fighter: ‘Which freedom struggle were you part of? Salt satyagraha? Non-cooperation? Extremist? Terrorist? Were you in the Bose group?’ Bharateeyudu selects Bose and the INA over the official Gandhian nationalism, possibly to suggest that Gandhi and Nehru, figures popularly identified with the post-Independence nation-state, are indeed a part of the problem. What they have left behind is a decaying nation which has failed to live up to the glorious sacrifices of the freedom fighters. The INA, on the other hand, is seen as representing a more uncompromising nationalism, one that deals with problems through direct solutions, imaged as fearless, violent struggle and instant justice. But these solutions have not become part of the dominant image, as we have it, of nationalism.

Given this reading of the nationalist struggle, the part played by Amritavalli is significant. Senapati’s wife, it has been noted, is the filmic
character most closely identified with the uncompromising resistance of the freedom fighters. Even so, and although in later life Amritavalli stands by her husband when he takes up his struggle against corruption, the film does not endow her with the moral stature of Senapati or his moral strength. Her devotion to Chandu, her ‘motherly instinct’, comes in the way of her commitment to her husband’s cause: when her daughter is dying of burns, she tries to bribe with jewellery the doctor who has refused to treat the girl; when Chandu is being pursued by his avenging father, she tries to save him by tacitly declining to tell Senapati of his whereabouts.

Amritavalli seems to represent a ‘soft’ nationalism, figured in the film perhaps by the absent Gandhi. Her love for her children overshadows her nationalism in the present. Unlike her commitment to the nationalist struggle in the past, her present response is remarkably apolitical, the family being shown as more important for her than the nation. Although this invites the chiding of her husband towards the end of the film, this is precisely what is intended to endear her to us – her attempt to be a good mother. Senapati, on the other hand, is not merely a father. His repoliticization into heroic, violent and terroristic action is counterpointed by Amritavalli’s gradual depoliticization into motherhood. Her image, we argue, represents a gendering as female both aspects of the dominant strand of the nationalist struggle – Gandhian non-violence, as well as the maternalistic welfare-state Nehruvian socialism which has failed because it is not tough enough on its citizens. Towards the end of the film, when Senapati is arrested for murder and is being taken away by the police, another old man from the crowd calls out: ‘Why are you arresting this old man? He’s been doing what the government couldn’t do in fifty years.’

In short, 1947 is indicated as the crucial cut-off point, that seemingly glorious moment of our history which is really the beginning of our downfall. In this narrative, it is fitting that Nehru is presented as presiding over the inaugural moment of nationalism gone wrong, whose future is imaged as coming to fruition in our corrupt post-colonial present.

**Everyday Corruption**

It is as if all the misery of the present can be condensed into this one theme of corruption. Those who are corrupt, according to the film, are government officials, employees of the state. Curiously, there is a marked absence of politicians and elected representatives, all the more remarkable for a film made at the height of public prosecution of major Indian political figures on the charge of corruption. ‘Corruption’ is produced in *Bharateeyudu* as self-explanatory, self-evident, as the truth about our predicament. Corruption, the film seems to say, is something one finds in everyday interactions, and not necessarily in high places: Senapati’s targets are middle- or low-level government officials (the Corporation
Commissioner; the Village Administrative Officer; the police sub-inspector; the doctor, later a Dean in Nizam’s Hospital; the treasury official; the traffic policeman. Corruption is presented as a problem for all sections, but more so for the poor. Senapati asks the VAO who demands a bribe: ‘I can pay because I have the money, but what about the poor?’ Poverty figures briefly but prominently, symbolized by the old woman whose cobbler husband is killed in a police firing even as he sews Senapati’s belt. But the film is not about poverty or the problems of the poor. The state could adequately take care of the poor who have been subjected to unjust or undue hardship, if only the servants of the state would do their duty without expecting ‘extra’ for it. The primary cause of the poor’s suffering, then, turns out to be the corruption among government employees, from the attender to the treasury officer.

The way the film piles image upon image of petty acts of bribery appears to mimic, and reinforce, the anecdotal mode in which middle-class grievances are strung together and presented as social analysis. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the film depicts low-level corruption: it helps produce the frisson of recognition, it is seen to touch everybody’s life; everyone in the audience can come up with illustrations to endorse the film’s representations. The personal narratives of corruption that the film invokes are reminiscent of the anecdotes which were mobilized during the anti-Mandal agitation to decry the ‘evils’ of reservations. Mandal is indeed a tacit reference point in the film, as we shall elaborate later. How the film secures our consent for the analysis it shapes is directly related to how we are enabled to disavow corruption, to turn it into a phenomenon that we are part of and also distanced from at the same time. This disavowal is accomplished through complex structures of identification.

There are the victim figures we sympathize with, even the ones who are compelled to give bribes, like the cobbler’s wife, or Chandu in the first part of the film. The taking of bribes is seen as far more serious, earning from Senapati the penalty of death. Sometimes, as in the case of the corporation commissioner killed by Senapati in the opening scenes of the film, the giver of the bribe is not even shown. Although after Senapati’s appearance on TV, some officials attempt to make reparation, no bribe-giver is ever shown as repentant, suggesting that the giving is performed under duress and that the giver is not part of the same market economy as his or her exploiters. The character of Chandu is in some ways an exception; initially the audience is on his side, when he is shown as a victim of the system, forced to give bribes to survive. He begins to slip in our estimation only when the link between consumerism and corruption is made evident.

Morality as Politics
Our initial identification is with Chandu, presented as a genial and
hapless young man, desiring the life of the modern that his father's austerity denies him. His 'corruption' is shown for the most part not as a way of life held up for admiration but as street-smartness, as a way of negotiating the modern. Then there is Senapati himself, the harmless-looking old man with a militant past, roused to action by the corruption of our times. Senapati offers a moral analysis of our contemporary predicament, not a political one. While the film depicts the past almost entirely in conventional political terms, the present is shown as both apolitical and immoral. Senapati, however, is the supremely moral subject, and therefore in the film's terms the supremely political subject too. When he appears on cable TV to harangue the nation and execute the corrupt doctor, he is literally clothed as a political subject – he wears his INA uniform with a round pin on the chest carrying the colours of the Indian flag. The film seems to suggest that Senapati's everyday dhoti and kurta is actually a disguise, just like the western-style suit which he wears in the last sequence. His most natural dress is the INA uniform (the dress that shows us who he 'really' is), which he wears when he offers his diagnosis of what is wrong with the nation. The clothing, then, enables the moral diagnosis to be presented as a political one, just as Senapati's actions, arising out of moral indignation, are politicized by the film, seen as making for change.

The production of Senapati as authentic political subject thus validates his analysis of corruption as a political statement, not a moral one, so that in the film the ethical appears as the political. The persuasive force of this analysis stems from corruption's availability as a commonsense critique of the present, a critique that appears to span various ideological differences. This consensus is related in turn to a wide acceptance of what constitutes the liberal state and what kind of regulation of civic life it should provide. The nationalist citizen, the citizen endowed with rights, is presented in this film as a militant citizen-subject, in short, a vigilant/vigilante citizen attempting single-handedly to enforce good governance. Played by Nedumudi Venu, the CBI officer Krishnaswami, who bonds with Senapati even as he pursues him, says he would himself ask for Senapati's autograph if he did not have to do his duty by arresting him for murder. Our sympathy is continually elicited for the good policeman – if he had been of an older generation, he could indeed have been Senapati himself.14

Portraying as corrupt all the organs of the state, repressive as well as welfare apparatuses; the elimination of corrupt officials; and Senapati's broadcast to the nation on cable TV in which corruption is blamed for the country's backwardness – these events set the stage for the final confrontation between Senapati and his son. Chandu has issued, in return for a bribe, a fitness certificate to a decrepit bus which later falls apart, leading to the death of forty schoolchildren. Chandu tries to bribe his way out, pleading with the police officer investigating the case and
the government doctor involved in the autopsies that they ought to help each other, since they are all government servants. Caught redhanded by his father at trying to inject alcohol into the dead bus driver’s body so as to falsify the post-mortem report, Chandu appeals to paternal love. Spurning this as an emotional bribe, Senapati tries to kill his son with the same knife from his INA belt which he has used on the other government officials. Chandu escapes, but is ultimately tracked down by the ‘meticulous old terrorist’ (Krishnaswami’s words) and killed after a breathtaking chase.

**Split Hero**
When did we last see a 75-year-old hero? How are our sympathies finally secured for Senapati? As audience, our interest is made to swing away from Chandu to his father. We suggest here some of the ways in which this is managed. The narrative crucially hinges on the confrontation between father and son and on what the two characters represent. Senapati and Chandu stand not for ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ but for two related though very different perspectives on the present. Significantly, they are presented as rival heroic figures up to a point, and are in fact introduced as individuals unrelated to each other. Both are displayed to the audience as ‘heroic’, albeit in different ways. Generally, in Indian popular cinema, dual roles complement each other and the tensions generated between the two are usually resolved by the film’s ending, which shows the two joining hands to defeat the common enemy. *Bharateeyudu* plays with the audience’s expectations, allowing us to assume until almost the very end that father and son will be reconciled, that Chandu will mend his ways.

The younger ‘hero’ is presented to us as a ‘common man’, a victim of the corrupt system who has nonetheless gained a place for himself within it. Chandu earns our admiration and sympathy for his ability to succeed in a system where all the odds are against him. He is shown to us literally on the streets, struggling to survive as a tout. His predicament is partly due to his father’s refusal to help him (ignoring a cardinal rule of paternal responsibility). Chandu also demeans himself, doing menial jobs because of his love for Ishwarya. He wants to bribe his way into a brake inspector’s job because he does not want to marry the girl while he is only a ‘broker’. Interestingly, the choice for him is not between honesty and corruption but between being a broker for the corrupt machinery of the government and becoming a part of that machinery. We are not induced to condemn him, initially. He is presented as comic but not foolish; we laugh at his troubles which actually make him more lovable. And like the conventional hero, Chandu is macho, to the extent that there is a ‘surplus heroine’ trying hard to engage his attention. This other heroine’s main function is to enhance the attractiveness of the younger hero.
The film presents us with two narratives that run parallel to each other, each centred around one of the heroes. The editing ensures that both share reel-time almost equally, with rapidly alternating sequences that feature each of them in turn. Chandu’s narrative is about the naturalness of corruption, of its regretted but inevitable place in our daily life; here corruption is dramatized for us in a series of comic episodes involving not only Chandu but also the minor characters Subbiah (Chandu’s sidekick) and Pandireswara Rao (who works in the transport office). ‘What is government?’ Subbiah asks rhetorically of a young man he is trying to induce to part with a bribe for a driving licence, ‘Putting amounts in envelopes is government.’ Senapati’s narrative, on the other hand, depicts corruption as the supreme evil, diagnosing it as the ‘cancer’ eating away our body politic. Described thus, it can only be fought by the direst of means. The forcefulness of the film lies in its ability to allow its audience to appreciate and inhabit both narratives simultaneously, until certain events jolt it into accepting one over the other.

Even as Chandu romances, dances and fights his way into our hearts, Senapati’s narrative grows progressively more central to the film. The old man is shown performing crucial tasks which are generally set aside for a younger hero, involving as they do both strength and swiftness. Each one of Senapati’s killings is graphically depicted, but there is a striking economy of violence in his actions. Unlike the lengthy, conventional fight scene between Chandu and the man who steals Ishwarya’s animals, Senapati’s murders are quickly and efficiently performed – the deft use of his fingers and a couple of thrusts with his knife is all a killing takes. Like the traditional hero, Senapati is shown outwitting the police who, incidentally, are depicted – in contrast to the police in other popular films – as extremely efficient and non-violent in their methods. He shares the audience’s knowledge of events which he does not witness. For instance, he knows intuitively where Chandu has hidden his mother; changes the colour of his van when we learn that the police are looking for him; and knows that the CBI officials have a videotape of his final escape.

The process of constructing Senapati as the real ‘Indian’ continues throughout the film. The long flashbacks contribute to locating him in the nationalist movement, the archetypal source of the heroism of the modern Indian, as well as creating his credentials as the wronged, revenge-seeking hero. Chandu, on the other hand, is increasingly seen as marked by an emptiness: not only does he have no claim on the national movement, he also crosses over to the other side, returning to the village briefly only to blame his sister’s death not upon the local doctor but his father’s uncompromising stand on corruption.

The televised murder of the doctor who refused to extend medical assistance to Senapati’s daughter is followed by the old man’s incorporation into the public iconography of heroism. An enormous hoarding of his figure appears at a busy intersection, and we are shown
instances of ‘ordinary’ people using intimidation of various kinds against corrupt government servants. Simultaneously, Chandu’s hero-value is diminished for us when, after the bus accident for which he is responsible, he bribes his way to falsifying the police and medical reports. It is at this point that we finally abandon Chandu to his fate. His realization that his father will not spare his life coincides with our realization, which is as shocked as Chandu’s is, that the young man is not a true hero after all. Not only will he die, but his death will not be tragic. Till the end of the film, Senapati and Chandu retain their mutually opposed beliefs, but what changes is the audience’s estimate of each. While Chandu is willing to sacrifice his father to save himself, Senapati is prepared to sacrifice his son in order to save the nation. In this way, the complementary dual hero of popular cinema becomes in Bharateeyudu the split hero.

Both characters make a claim for hero status, since both share qualities generally identifiable with the hero. Contrary to our expectations, however, it is the older man who wins out in the end. Part of the film’s appeal lies precisely in this unusual movement of the narrative. The enormous technical and financial investment in Senapati’s make-up (or Kamalahasan’s disguise) has found its place on the film’s posters as one of its highlights, and has indeed been received as such by cross-sections of the audience. Because of the fact that the undisguised hero also plays a major role in the film, the Senapati make-up constantly draws attention to itself, eliciting audience questions, such as ‘Who is he? What does he really look like?’ Senapati is admired not only because of what he stands for but because Kamalahasan, as the old man, puts on show his ability to play roles with a ‘difference’. The film, then, produces as ‘real’ an embodied person who does not exist outside the cinematic frame, unlike the star-body of the young Kamalahasan. For this production of the real, and the real as the truly Indian, the film sometimes has to take recourse to startling devices, such as the little episode of the traffic constable. In this episode, two young African men, characters unusual to Indian popular cinema, are used to counterpoint and thereby affirm Senapati’s identity. Stopped on their two-wheeler by the bribe-seeking cop, they are thrilled when Senapati knocks him out. They call out to Senapati, in English: ‘Hey, old man! By the way, who are you?’ ‘Me?’ comes the reply, also in English, and with a self-deprecating smile, ‘I am an Indian.’

Caste Narratives
The scene with the traffic policeman is also important in the film for its underscoring of the anti-Mandal theme. It is worth stressing at this point that the film is read by us with the help of interpretive structures which have been formed through our understanding of present-day politics, in India at large and in Andhra Pradesh in particular. As has been argued elsewhere, incidentally in relation to another film of Shankar’s, one
cannot measure the validity of a reading by its ‘faithfulness’ to some self-contained text of the film, but rather by whether it is able to throw light on aspects of contemporary politics. One often hears today, in the context of film interpretation, an old accusation that used to have some currency in literary critical circles – that charge of ‘over-reading’, presumably referring to the valorization of elements in a film that appear incidental to the narrative. It is not unlikely that the same charge might be levelled against our reading of the anti-Mandai elements in Bharateeyudu. We argue that these elements form a crucial subtext in the film, although they cannot be read in a unilinear fashion; that is, Bharateeyudu cannot be described in any simple sense as anti-Mandal. What the presence of the anti-Mandal elements demonstrate, however, is that any film claiming to deal with the contemporary period cannot but allude to Mandal, however obscure or tangential such allusions may be. They form a subtle undertow to the main narrative, which compels us to read them in a particular way so as to endorse the logic of that narrative, whereas the same set of allusions in a different plotting might yield, as in Shankar’s Kaadalan, an altogether different reading.

Bharateeyudu’s narrative of everyday corruption, we argue, is both necessarily and inconsistently related to the moment represented by the anti-Mandal agitation. The event and its fallout (the analyses of the anguish of upper caste youth, the foregrounding of the reservations issue, the invocation of ‘merit’) are now so much part of the history of the present that anti-Mandal allusions are routinely available in the structuring of our commonsense to be put to a variety of uses. Take the traffic policeman scene, for example. Senapati wanders through, his attention drawn by the policeman’s action against a pair of young office-workers on a motorbike. The driver of the bike wants to know why he is not allowed to move on, since all his papers are in order. The policeman, after asking for a bribe of Rs.150, starts to shout at the unwilling motorcyclist. Senapati stands next to the young office-goer, listening. He asks the young man to take off his shoe, picks it up, puts it on the seat of the traffic policeman’s motorbike, and tells the policeman he must clean the office-goer’s shoe first and then take the money. In this fleeting gesture, which in many ways is more violent than the blow with which Senapati later knocks out the policeman, an entire caste hierarchy is etched – one which inscribes the victimized office-goer as upper caste/class and the bribe-seeking policeman as lower caste/class. The meritorious, the scene suggests, should be exempt at least from polishing their own shoes. In our post-Mandal present, this symbolism requires no further interpretation. What the image of the shoe does economically is to yoke together the corrupt and non-meritorious with the inefficient ‘quota’ officer, suggesting that both kinds of public servant are merely self-seeking, and therefore do not have the interests of the nation at heart.
Another sequence thematizes a popular anti-Mandal image—that of the good dalit in his place, the deserving lower caste poor person, contrasted implicitly with the corrupt traffic policeman. A cobbler by the roadside is hard at work, sewing Senapati’s belt which doubles as a knife-sheath. A demonstration is taking place nearby, with young men holding aloft placards which read, in English, ‘Revolution’, ‘Stop Corruption!’ and so on. The police open fire on the crowd; a young protester is shot in the leg, and the bullet passes right through him and hits the cobbler, killing him instantly. When the government announces compensation of Rs.10,000 to the families of those killed in the incident, the cobbler’s wife puts in an application. We follow her travails as one treasury official after another demands a bribe from her. After using up her savings for the smaller bribes, the cobbler’s wife is finally shown helpless before the officer who demands a cut for passing on her cheque. When she starts abusing him, he has her evicted from his office. In the crowd outside is Senapati who—in the sequence that follows—seeks out and kills the treasury officer. The cobbler, who earned what liberal discourse would call an honest living, who did not aspire to a station above his own, merited, the film implies, Senapati’s espousal of his cause.

Yet another deployment of a distinctly anti-Mandal image is that of the middle class, upper caste person doing menial tasks. As part of his effort to get the brake inspector job, Chandu does various small chores in Swapna’s house—running errands, threading her petticoat string—which, although presented as comic, somehow unmans him, calling forth the audience’s sympathy. These menial tasks are also seen as a direct outcome of corruption. Once again we see the convergence of the anti-Mandal and the corruption narrative: it is implied that because Chandu is an upper caste person he doesn’t qualify for reservations, and that this is an important reason he has to resort to corrupt means to obtain a government job. Swapna, the patron’s daughter, represents the link between greed and consumerism that the film portrays as the main cause of corruption. Surrounded as she is by the consumer goods (cameras, CD decks, luxury cars) her father, a government servant, has illegitimately managed to acquire, Swapna’s desire for a relationship with Chandu never has a chance, notwithstanding her beauty and intelligence. Chandu, on the other hand, desires to marry Ishwarya, a Blue Cross member obsessed with animals, marked by her clothing and concerns as upper caste-class. While her obsession is gently ridiculed in the film, it functions as an index of her caste-class superiority (and therefore of Chandu’s desire for her), most vividly in the sequence involving the ox-cart driver Mallesham whom she berates for ill-treating his animal. Although Ishwarya embodies Chandu’s aspirations to be successful and modern, she is not shown surrounded by consumer durables. Presented to us as naive, pure and innocent, she stands apart from the world of the everyday and above the corrupt system that Swapna and Chandu both
inhabit. The depiction of Chandu as seeking a government job by any means because of his ambition to marry Ishwarya, and not necessarily because of his desire for consumer goods, helps the audience to see him as vulnerable and likeable for the better part of the film.

**The Eastern-Modern**

We have tried to show how the narrative structure of *Bharateeyudu* produces an ambivalence towards the dominant model of modernity/nationhood that India has emulated in the post-Independence years. The ambivalence is accompanied, we contend, by a gesturing towards another model, that of the 'Asian tigers'. This model might well be called the 'eastern-modern'. The gesturing is endorsed by the rewriting of nationalist history which we have already described. The film represents the INA, with its 'eastern' connections, taking centre stage in the story of the freedom struggle; the first nationalist leader shown in flashback is Subhas Chandra Bose, and it is the INA's confrontation with British troops near Kohima which, in the cinematic narrative, directly precedes and is therefore imaged as leading to the acquisition of Independence. Independence, however, becomes in the film a promise betrayed, resulting in the degenerate present in which both Nehruvian welfarism and western modernity are implicated. While the first has led to the proliferation of inefficient and corrupt government servants, the second has been responsible for the creation of consumerist desire on which corruption is seen to feed (Chandu promises as bribe a colour TV set to the police inspector and a 'laser disc' to the government doctor). The film's narrative onslaught on this state of affairs does not, curiously enough, manifest itself in an argument for doing away with the welfarist state or in an attempt to propagate a Gandhian critique of western lifestyles. Instead, *Bharateeyudu* seems to clamour, as a number of popular films of the 1980s have been doing, for 'clean governance' and an 'efficient' state. In doing so, the film articulates the unease with liberalization shared by various groups in India, despite the general consensus within the mainstream political parties that globalization and liberalization are inevitable. The unease about liberalization raises questions in the film about the particular model of the 'modern' that India could adopt. Unlike the 'tiny island states' around us, we have failed to progress, says Senapati in his TV address. It is corruption that is responsible for our 'backwardness', according to him, and it is the state machinery that harbours corruption. The rest of the east, however, is quite different: their states are so well-regulated as to be the least corrupt in the world.

A series of references to this 'east' marks the filmic text: the INA headquarters, where Senapati's valour is recognized by Subhas Chandra Bose, who pins a medal on him, was in East Asia, as the film reminds us the 'east' is also the 'origin' of the march on British forces in India which
leads in the filmic narrative to the final confrontation with the colonizers; in the cable TV sequence, we hear the dialogue between the doctor and Senapati about the reasons for the prosperity of the small islands of Asia, and later the police are told, as an explanation why the telecast could not be stopped, that the video-cassette was sent to Singapore and telecast from the Philippines. The final scene of the film shows us a phone booth against a background of skyscrapers. Senapati, who has escaped from the airport conflagration caused by his pursuit and killing of Chandu, and is now dressed for the first time in a western-style suit, speaks to the CBI officer in India. ‘So you’re alive,’ says Krishnaswami. ‘Where are you?’ A glimpse of a banner in Chinese or Japanese indicates that it is from East Asia that Senapati is keeping watch over India, where he will return whenever he is needed.

A standard explanation for the economic success of the Asian tigers has suggested that they combine ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ in equal measure. The uniqueness of Bharateeyudu lies in its refusal of this explanation, indeed in its attempt to unsettle the very terms of the discussion. A strategy employed by the film to re-figure the tradition-modernity relationship is to disorganize, as Shankar’s earlier film Kaadalan does, the binary rural-urban created, although in different ways, by both commercial and parallel cinema in post-Independence India. Senapati the old farmer is the person in the film most at ease with modern gadgets – he is shown driving a variety of vehicles; using a spray-can to paint the old van he buys; speaking into a cordless phone. As part of the suturing which enables us to accept Senapati over Chandu, no distance is shown between the old man and the products of new technology. Senapati inhabits the space occupied by these objects in such a way that they are naturalized, seen in use, not fetishized as in the Melbourne song sequence which features Chandu’s displaced desires. Senapati is completely in command at the private TV station as well, operating the machinery single-handedly without any fumbling. After the telecast killing in which he wears his INA uniform, as part of the public celebration of his actions we have a brief catwalk shot of a row of fashionable young men on the street dressed in INA outfits, except that they are not khaki but blue, mauve, and pistachio green. We hear in voiceover a girl exclaiming that all these young fellows ‘look like Bose’. Given its heterogeneous structure of address, the film can effortlessly incorporate a historical figure into a fashion statement. The effect is to suggest that the support for Senapati’s diagnosis and remedy is truly popular, shown by the film as cutting across class-caste, including the ‘modern’ youth, the meritorious students who put up the cutout of Senapati, the cobbler’s wife, and the poor peasant who threatens a government official seeking a bribe from him. The resonance of Bharateeyudu, we have argued, lies in its ambivalence towards consumerism, often imaged as greed for ‘western’ commodities. This
greed is identified in the film as the chief cause of corruption, the malady of our present. Corruption, implies the narrative, comes from selfishness, from not being nationalist, from an unbridled craving for the modern. Only by putting the nation first can Indians break the link between consumerism and corruption; only by ceasing to fetishize the products of western technology can one learn how to make them one's own. In this attempt to become modern, not by capitulating to the 'West' but by retaining a strong sense of sovereignty, East Asia plays a prominent role in Bharateeyudu. The last sequence in the film – Senapati calling the cops from East Asia – suggests that this notion of nationalism, of Indianness, is perhaps best preserved not on Indian soil but by the expatriate. Where Bharateeyudu differs from contemporary Hindi films which invoke the Non-Resident Indian is in placing this figure not in the West but in East Asia. Reinscribed in the film as a primary site of anti-colonial struggle, the region implicitly becomes an image of the (modern but non-western) future. That the film should signify a possible Indian future in terms of someone else's present, and that this tale of corruption and consumerism should invoke such popular acclaim, points, as we have argued, to widespread anxiety about liberalization, the sense of losing control, that characterize our time.\(^{26}\)

NOTES

We would like to thank Rekha Pappu, K. Murali, R. Srivatsan and Vivek Dhareshwar for their provocative comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1. This is a distinction made by popular film magazines and regular moviegoers. A 'class' film is distinguished from a 'mass' film by its supposed seriousness and 'higher' aesthetic quality. Chiranjeevi is a Telugu star and Rajnikant a Tamil one.

2. Earlier films by these directors were usually made in Tamil and dubbed into Telugu. Now they are being dubbed simultaneously into Telugu and Hindi, with some sequences re-shot to provide the local linguistic context. These dubbed films circulate in different political-cultural spaces from the 'original' Tamil versions. Our response to Bharateeyudu is to the Telugu version, which played to full houses for over sixty days in fifty theatres all over Andhra Pradesh state, and went on to become one of the biggest hits of the year.

3. This polemic can be seen operating at different levels of the filmic text. There is, for example, the comic scene at the racetrack when Chandu's sidekick Subbiah is trying to provoke his bète-noir Pandireswara Rao. The latter is in the stands with his young son, who is dark, short and plump as his father is. When Subbiah asks for the name of the boy, the father says, beaming: 'Arvind Swamy'. The reference is to Maniratnam's tall, fair hero of the same name, the star of Roja and Bombay.


5. Direction, screenplay and story by Shankar. The Tamil version is called India
The Indian National Army was first formed in Singapore in September 1942 by Mohan Singh, an Indian officer of the British Army who had decided to go to the Japanese for help in freeing India from colonial rule. The INA's recruits were Indian prisoners of war of the Japanese army which had just then occupied Singapore. Owing to serious differences which broke out between INA leaders and the Japanese, the former were arrested. In 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose was brought to Singapore with the help of the Germans and Japanese, and after setting up the Provisional Government of Free India he began to reorganize the INA. Civilians, including women, were recruited for the INA from India as well. One battalion of the INA accompanied the Japanese army to the Indo-Burma frontier and took part in the Imphal campaign. The Japanese retreat and eventual surrender, however, put paid to the military hopes of the INA as well. The INA had its origins in part in the revolutionary terrorist movement (begun in different parts of India and the Indian diaspora in the early part of the century and reorganized in the 1920s and early 1930s) which engaged in direct and violent action against British targets, somewhat to the discomfort of the Indian National Congress to which many of the terrorists also owed allegiance.

The reality effect is achieved by the merging of documentary footage with filmic narrative, sometimes by superimposing images on existing footage, as for example in the sequence in which the 'real' Bose pins a medal on the chest of the filmic character Senapati.

In order to juxtapose the different strands of the national movement, several campaigns from different decades are compressed together in the filmic narrative.

In our reading of the place of Bose in the history of nationalism, one of the books we found most useful is Bidyut Chakrabarty's *Subhas Chandra Bose and Middle-Class Radicalism, A Study in Indian Nationalism 1928-1940* (Delhi: OUP, 1990). For a general history of Indian nationalism, see Bipan Chandra, et. al., *India's Struggle for Independence* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989).

Subhas Chandra Bose has never featured in a major way in nationalist iconography. He has certainly never been seen as equal to Gandhi and Nehru, although *Bharateeyudu*’s narrative structure seeks to position him, from the perspective of the present, as more significant than either of them.

A little joke is tucked into the filmic narrative as if to mark the absence of the real Gandhi. The only time we see a reference to this name is when we see a nameplate of Swapna's father. The name of this corrupt government official, a transport supervisor, is M. Gandhi Krishna.

A reference to the 1990 announcement of the implementation of reservations (sometimes dismissively called quotas) in public sector jobs and educational institutions for the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). The announcement was followed by a major agitation, predominantly urban, by upper caste youth, leading to the fall of the central government.

The film, while it seems to celebrate consumerism in the first two song sequences, for example, simultaneously also appears to suggest that the desire for consumer goods is closely linked to corruption.

When Krishnaswami brings home-cooked food for the old man who is in custody, Senapati asks whether he has 'changed his "route"'. 'No', replies the policeman. 'My route is the same as yours.'

The presentation of a near-totalitarian justice might indeed be read as 'fascist', as the star Kamalalhasan himself does in accounting for the appeal of the film (Interview with Khalid Mohamed, *Filmfare*, July 1996), but we feel that this description forecloses any attempt to analyse the ambivalent politics of the film. Most heroic figures in popular cinema can be read with equal certitude as
fascist. If we accept this kind of reading, we run the risk of fitting the ‘mass appeal’ of popular films and their complicated structuring of consent into an overly simple analytical frame.


17. This is due, we feel, to the heterogeneous structure of address of popular cinema. Meaning is not necessarily produced by an individual auteur (director/scriptwriter), but rather by the response of audiences formed by a variety of political questions that carry different valencies for each segment of spectators. Hence, as we implied earlier, the Tamil and Telugu versions of the film are viewed in signifying spaces that are quite different from each other.

18. The film also mobilizes the signifier of complexification in the representation of caste-class difference. Even without such a deployment, our argument is that the gesture of the shoe produces an entire structure of allusions which performs the function we have described: that of etching caste-class identity for the viewer.

19. One of the methods of agitation adopted by anti-Mandalites was to polish shoes in public places, implying that they would be reduced to taking menial jobs such as these (associated with the lower castes), if reservations were extended to backward castes.

20. The Senapati cutout that is put up at an intersection after his entry into the public imagination has a legend underneath which tells us who has erected it: ‘Students who have got seats without giving donations’. Also, in the second flashback, Ambedkar’s photo figures prominently on the wall, his image looming large between the faces of Senapati and the sub-inspector who is asking for a bribe. This apparent discrediting by association of Ambedkar could also be seen as part of the film’s general discrediting of nationalist leaders other than Subhas Chandra Bose.

21. In the wake of Senapati’s televised killing of the doctor, an official from the treasury brings to the cobbler’s wife the money the government owes her. As he leaves, she says, referring to Senapati: ‘Who is that man? If he stands for election, my vote is for him.’ In Senapati, we find the authoritarian (male) figure who proclaims his intention to root out corruption — shades of Seshan — and is solicited by the public to seek electoral office. ‘Fear is my weapon,’ says Senapati in voiceover when he decides to avenge his daughter’s death and crusade against corruption, ‘fear of punishment, fear of death.’ Fear and the violence which produces it are presented in Bharateeyudu as the sole guarantors of both stability and civic responsibility. T.N.Seshan was until his retirement in 1996 the Chief Election Commissioner, known for his pursuit of violators of the election code.

22. In a strategy of displacement, however, a fantasy song-sequence with Chandu and Ishwarya set in Australia likens the woman to a cellular phone, declares her voice to be ‘as though ... digitally cut’, and wonders if Brahma the creator used a computer to produce her.

23. A half-page newspaper advertisement appeared in Andhra Jyothi (June 30, 1996) stating that the film Bharateeyudu is dedicated to the freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose on the occasion of his hundredth birthday. The ad has a tricolor map of India on which is partly superimposed a black-and-white sketch of Bose and a coloured painting of the character Senapati in INA uniform. In the lower right-hand corner are photographs of the producer A.M. Ratnam, the director Shankar, and the music-composer A.R. Rahman.

24. Although we are shown the televised killing as though it is taking place in real time, the audience realizes later that there is a time-gap between Senapati’s production of the event and its telecast.

25. The empowerment of the ‘ordinary man’ by Senapati’s actions is plotted even
into the comedy track of the film. Chandu’s sidekick Subbiah threatens his bête noire Pandireshwara Rao into issuing him a driver’s licence without the usual bribe.

26. We as authors of this paper do not share the diagnosis of the present offered by the film, and find Senapati’s resolution politically problematic. However, we would like to distance ourselves from simplistic readings which see in the film only an apologia for liberalization.