

# IS THERE A PUBLIC IN THE CINEMA HALL?

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My research examines discussions on cinema halls and their audiences in the reputed Telugu film journal *Roopavani* [1] in the 1940s and 1950s. These discussions, which tell us a great deal about the conditions in cinema halls in this period, draw attention to how and in what spaces sections of the audience (middle class, upper caste, male) constituted themselves into a *public*. The discursive construction of the two collectives-the public, a specific sub-section which was simultaneously a part of and distinct from the audience in general-continues to be critical to much discussion of the cinema in the print media till the present. *Roopavani* writings, when read against the background of similar writings in the Tamil and English published from Madras since the 1930s, raise important questions about the notion of 'public' as a collective with shared responsibilities and physical-discursive spaces where it is formed.

In the period under consideration sections of the middle class, upper caste and male viewership of the cinema fashioned itself into a 'public' distinct from the rest of the audience. It constituted itself as a public in the Habermasian sense of the term in that it makes the public sphere, no doubt narrowly conceived, an authority to which appeals could be made in matters of 'common interest'. This is not to suggest that the only public that was formed in and around the cinema is one that consists of educated, upper caste, middle class men. On the contrary, I agree with Nancy Fraser when she says, '[V]irtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics' and '[t]he relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual' (1994: 79). I try to show that the conflictual relations between the middle class public and other audience groups is central to understanding the public sphere of cinema [2]. Discussions on cinema halls are particularly relevant since they became an occasion for the articulate middle class public to arrive at definitive normative formulations on the nature of the filmgoing experience on the one hand and the nature and function of the public space opened up by the cinema on the other. The use or abuse of the space of the cinema hall is a pivotal issue in these discussions. This endeavour needs to be situated in the context (I cannot discuss this in detail for reasons of space and focus) of a rapid increase in the spread of cinema due to a rise in the production of Telugu films (from 1950) and the construction of new cinema halls due to the lifting of war time curbs on the film industry.

K. Sivathamby opens a new line of inquiry when he says:

The Cinema Hall was the first performance centre in which all Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of the seating is not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power. If he cannot afford paying the higher rate, he has either to keep away from the performance or be with 'all and sundry' (Sivathamby 1981: 18). [3]

Implicit in Sivathamby's statement is the suggestion that the cinema had tremendous democratic potential in a context where distinctions of caste have played a crucial role in determining access to public places, including temples, village water sources and even streets. There were, in fact, protracted struggles across the country asserting the right of lower castes to be *physically present* in these spaces [4]. Sandria Freitag's suggestion that 'South Asian collective activities in open spaces constituted a fundamental form of expression of the polity-a form we may take as a kind of "public opinion",' (Freitag 1991: 67) is of immediate relevance here for it helps us see the increasing popularity of the cinema among the lower caste-class groups, particularly with the beginning of the 'talkie era' in the 1930s, as a sign of the cinema's increasing importance as an institution of the public sphere.

M. S. S. Pandian reads the response of 'cultural elites' as a reaction to cinema's emergence as a social equaliser:

The arrival of talkies in Tamil during the 1930s was received with much enthusiasm by the lower class film audience. However, such subaltern enthusiasm for this new form of leisure was simultaneously accompanied by enormous anxiety among the upper caste/class elites (Pandian 1996: 950).

It is possible to argue that the history of the cinema in many parts of the world is characterized by the enthusiasm of the lower classes which in turn produced the anxiety of the state as well as the elites resulting in a range of legislation on the one hand and sustained campaigns aimed at 'cleaning up' both films and exhibition venues (Kuhn 1998 and Bowser 1990).

A note of caution is due at this point. Stephen P. Hughes (1996) warns against assuming that the cinema was a mass entertainment from day one. In his study of film exhibition in Madras, he points out that there is a significant time lag between the initial screenings of films and their evolution into a lower class entertainment. This intervening period witnessed concerted attempts by local exhibitors to make the medium accessible to a large cross section of society. Hughes' findings further our understanding of the complex history of the cinema as a public institution; a history shaped by the contests between and pressures by multiple agents. It is thus imperative that we do not take for granted a) that the cinema was always already a working class entertainment and, by implication, that it was a democratic institution and b) that the indigenous elites conspired to dilute the democratic character of cinema. The sense we get from reading some histories of cinema in USA is that the democratic potential of the medium was negated by the massive intervention of the middle class resulting in the death of the nickelodeon and the 'Primitive Mode of Representation' on the one hand and the emergence of large theatres-where the audience segregated along the lines of class and race-and the 'Industrial Mode of Representation' (see for example, Bowser 1990). In the Indian context, this does not appear to hold true, because Indian cinema never was an exclusively working class entertainment or one in which the audience was not segregated. There is now a growing body of evidence indicating that although members of lower castes were allowed to enter cinema halls, theatre managements ensured that caste and class hierarchies were reinforced within them. Dalits (members of formerly 'untouchable' castes) were physically prevented by theatre managements from entering the Balcony or the highest class in parts of rural Andhra Pradesh as late as the 1950s in order to avoid displeasing the predominantly upper caste customers there [5]. It is important to note that the cinema hall was one of the sites for the struggle of *political* rights as far as the lower caste-class viewers were concerned. The growing popularity of the medium among subaltern sections of society needs to be interpreted as a form of mobilisation in support of the right to access to the public sphere. Middle class discourse on the cinema is a response to this form of mobilisation around the cinema. In fact, it is useful to see the *Roopavani* discussion as attempts to find explanations for a critical question: why do people in ever increasing numbers go to the cinema? As we shall see, middle class viewers repeatedly pointed out that the conditions in cinema halls actively *discouraged* film viewing.

I find Partha Chatterjee's concepts 'civil society' and 'political society' useful in situating the discussions around cinema in a larger framework. Chatterjee argues that civil society in postcolonial societies is restricted to

those characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in western societies that are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberate procedures of decision-making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles (1997: 31).

He adds: 'the domain of civil social institutions as conceived above is still restricted to a fairly small section of "citizens"'. He proposes the notion of political society to conceptualize the vast majority of society which lies beyond civil society. Political society is the domain of the *population*, not 'citizens' and includes 'parties, movements, non-party political formations' (32). The *Roopavani* discussions underscore the centrality of the pedagogic function to the self-definition of the public. Chatterjee argues that the mark of non-western modernity is 'an always incomplete project of "modernization" and of the role of an enlightened elite engaged in a pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of society' (31) [6]. Crucially, there is a tension between civil society's intervention, framed by its project of modernization, and *democracy*, which Chatterjee argues, is the form of mobilization by which political society tries to channel and order popular demands.

What is striking about the *Roopavani* discussions is the invisibility of caste-no one speaks of caste or attributes misbehaviour of sections of the audience to possible lower caste origins. One of the defining features of the discourse of modernity in the Indian context is the bracketing of both caste and religious identities. It is not as if these identities disappeared as a consequence of nationalism but became 'excesses' which the normative citizen had shed. Vivek Dhareshwar (1993) points out that modern, secular citizens have treated the persistence of caste identities as a sign of the 'pre-modern'. Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana (1996) argue that the normative citizen-the abstraction on which the question of rights is predicated-is *invisibly marked* as middle-class, upper caste, Hindu and male (236) [7]. It is thus all the more important to pay attention to the caste implications of the utterances of the writers. Notably, the cinema hall itself was a modern institution in that it did not overtly recognize caste differences although managements may have tried to ensure that caste hierarchies were in fact maintained within the theatre premises. It is important that we do not misread this modernizing compulsion as a sign of the cinema's democratic character. The democratizing aspirations of political society made the cinema hall a site of contestation.

## Conditions in Cinemas

In July 1951 *Roopavani* began the column, 'Andhra Pradeshlo Cinema Theatre' ('Cinema Theatres in Andhra Pradesh', abbreviated as APT in the rest of this essay) which carried 4-6 letters/reports by readers across the Andhra region on the conditions in local cinema halls. For some months before this column began the letters to the editor column called 'Prajabhiprayam' ('Public Opinion') regularly published complaints about cinemas. Throughout the latter half of the 1940s, the journal carried articles about cinema halls, the exhibition sector, audiences and audiences' rights. These articles, highly critical of theatre managements, government officials and sections of the audience, set the tone of the debate by identifying a set of problems with relation to cinema halls and possible solutions to them. They also contain numerous details of the actual conditions in which films were watched.

Before *Roopavani*, other journals/newspapers circulating in Madras Presidency carried writings on the deplorable conditions in cinema halls. An article in the Tamil film magazine *Cinema Ulagam* (August 18, 1935: 13) on cinema halls noted that there was no toilet facility, that the shows did not start on time, that the projectionists were not qualified, that rules for theatre construction were not followed and that the location of theatres (in remote parts of the village/town) made it difficult for 'ladies' to visit them as there was no security [8]. Readers of *Madras Mail* (May 28, 1938: 12) complained that theatres were overcrowded and ill

ventilated. An editorial of the English film journal *Talk-A-Tone* (December 1941: 5-6) pointed out that in Madras cinemas, the booking offices were on the main road and resulted in obstruction to traffic and police cane charges, that the auditoriums were dirty and badly ventilated, that there were bugs even in the highest class seats, and that the lower class viewers, who contributed the biggest revenue to the producers and exhibitors, got the least comfort. In short, 'the audience suffer[ed] untold miseries from the moment they commence[d] buying tickets to the moment they [got] out of the theatre' [6]. By the time *Roopavani* began its column on cinema theatres there was an accumulation of public views on the subject. The letters/articles in the journal reflect the middle class audience's response to cinema halls and film viewing as a social practice. However, the *Roopavani* intervention was important because it was unprecedented in scale.

Let me briefly list the most frequent complaints against cinema halls in order to provide a sense of the conditions in which films were watched in this period. In the period under consideration, cinema halls had up to five different classes ranging from the floor class-the cheapest in which audience sat on the floor-to 'Reserved' or 'Box' which had chairs or even sofas ('Bhalaki' 1951: 37). All classes had separate seats for women, which were sometimes partitioned by bamboo, wooden or tin screens. Evidently the seating for all classes left much to be desired: there were no mats in the floor class, benches were rough, narrow and rickety, chairs were broken, infested with bugs and smelled foul (Rangarao 1947 and Hanumantharao 1948). Moreover, whenever new films were released, cinema halls were packed beyond capacity in all the classes. 'Extra chairs' were placed in the chair class, the bench and floor classes were packed to twice the stipulated capacity (the official figures were written near the entrance of each class) (Rao 1947, Rao 1948, Bhadrani 1951, Satyasree 1951, Visweswararao 1951). In addition, theatres were poorly ventilated and fans were too few or didn't work at all (Rangarao 1947 and Rao 1947). According to some readers, theatres were like cattle sheds, tobacco barns, rice mills and godowns and the audience was driven into the auditorium like sheep or cattle (Rangarao 1947, Deshpande 1948a, Anon. 1951). One writer likened the cinema halls in his town to Nazi concentration camps (Satyanarayanamurthy 1949: 31).

The sanitary conditions in theatres too were the subject of much discussion. It was pointed out that dogs roamed around freely in the auditorium; there were no toilets in some halls and in others they were dirty; halls were not cleaned regularly and cigarette/*beedi* butts, ground nut shells, etc. littered the floor. The walls and floor were spit/betel juice stained and due to poor ventilation viewers felt choked by cigarette, *beedi* and cheroot smoke (culled from Rangarao 1947, Deshpande 1948a, Hanumantharao 1948 and Apparao 1951). The viewers' right to comfort and sanitation, it was pointed out, were thus being denied in a number of ways. One writer warned that theatres should not be like jails and viewers should not feel that they have to force themselves to see films. The film viewing experience should be a pleasant one, no matter how bad the film, he opined (Sitaramaiah 1946).

What was the reason for the deplorable conditions in theatres? In other words, what were the agencies that were responsible for this state of affairs? A number of authors/readers held theatre managements, government officials and sections of the audience jointly responsible.

## **Theatre Management**

These writings, in addition to giving readers a sense of what the problems were with theatres, also attempted to lay down the rules for the management of halls. They are founded on shared assumptions on the nature of the cinema hall as a public place and the duties of the managers of this space-the exhibitors-as well as the government, which was the supervisory authority.

In *Roopavani* there were complaints about the failure of theatre managements to provide comfort and sanitation in the cinema halls. From the lack of drinking water to vendors hawking their wares noisily throughout the duration of the screening, a range of causes for the discomfort of viewers were traced to managements. Some years before the stream of

letters began pouring in, one article pointed out that there were three kinds of exhibitors in our country: sole proprietors of cinema halls, partnerships and leases (apparently of recent origin and increasing in numbers). *All* exhibitors, however, had certain responsibilities:

The primary responsibility of all these kinds of exhibitors is to ensure clean and healthy maintenance of halls. The second responsibility is to maintain cordial relations with the distributor and procure new and popular films. The third is to demonstrate respect for the audience and earn their affection (Hanumantharao 1948: 51).

It goes on to add, 'In our country our exhibitors are not fulfilling these responsibilities.' Not only should the exhibitors fulfil their responsibilities, but they should also do the following to become popular among the audience: provide proper furniture and toilets, carry out repairs, prevent smoking and spitting by carrying out a publicity campaign, place ashtrays and spittoons near entrances, ensure queue formation at booking counters, prevent black-marketing of tickets near hall gates, stop overbooking, listen sympathetically to complaints, rebuke staff who misbehave, provide a complaint book and display complaints and action taken on notice boards (51-52). Another article argues, '[The] minimum responsibilities of proprietors are starting on scheduled time, selling tickets according to capacity, maintaining sanitation' (Rao 1947: 26).

One writer argues, 'These theatres [compared to cattle sheds], which lack any facilities, are built only due to the greed of owners' (Deshpande 1948a: 42). Greedy managements sold tickets in the black-market and delayed the screening in the hope that more tickets would be sold and avoided spending money on repairs. Unless such theatres are boycotted the managements will not fall in line, the author concludes. A reader complained that 'rowdies' indulged in a lot of hideous activities, including pulling at ladies' clothes, but the theatre management was only interested in making money and did not prevent these atrocities (Niranjan 1951: 35). Another compared the managers of the local cinema to a gang of looters (Jeevan 1948: 61).

Mismanagement also resulted, it was felt, because exhibitors, even the most reputed ones [9], did not know how to manage a cinema hall. Some managements failed to, or did not care to, distinguish between cinema halls and other businesses. According to one reader, the local cinema hall had no screen-a wall was used-the sound was poor and the hall proprietor, who lived in another town, owned a silk mill and therefore didn't bother about the hall and whether it made a profit (Ratnam 1951: 21). Indeed, exhibitors seemed to know little about their business. There were complaints about the elevation of the screen and the impossibility of seeing anything beyond the headgear of the villager occupying the seat in front. Poles and pillars blocked the view at times. In places, the roof, made of tin, leaked in the monsoon and the sound of the rain wiped out the sound track. The rows of seats were so close to each other that it was difficult to reach the seat. The audio was poor and the projection was too fast at times (culled from Bhadram 1951, Lakshminarayana 1951 and Satyanarayana 1951).

There were also charges of cheating by theatre staff. Gatekeepers turned away bona fide ticket holders and sold 'out-passes' (a part of the ticket torn off and retained by the gatekeeper and issued to viewers before they leave the auditorium during the interval) to others. Booking clerks lied about the time of commencement of films and sold tickets for a good one-hour after the show began. A reader pointed out sarcastically that exhibitors screened films which proclaimed that good always prevails over evil but cheated their customers (Bhadram 1951: 40).

The charge of 'rowdiness' by management and staff is more serious in nature. Evidently theatre managements in different parts of parts of Andhra abused and ill-treated the audience. Readers complained of 'anarchy' and 'atrocities' committed by the management. A reader wrote that when his friend, a college teacher, complained to the theatre owner that seats in the balcony were bad and that there was no space between rows, the latter abused him and

tried to get him, as well as some others who sided with him, beaten up by his 'rowdies'. He concludes by saying, 'if this is the way educated upper class ticket holders are treated we can imagine the treatment meted out to the rest of the audience' (Lakshminarayana 1951: 41). Another alleged that the management 'placed' young men at the women's gate to 'pose' before the female viewers (Bikshalu 1951: 39). *Roopavani* writings suggest that theatre managements failed on many counts and exhibitors emerge as an inefficient, unscrupulous, undisciplined, ignorant, greedy, criminal lot, who had to be drastically transformed in order to improve the state of cinema halls.

## Government Officials

The complaints against theatre management are accompanied by appeals to the government, either the local municipal administration or the provincial one, to issue licenses only to theatres which cared for the comfort of the audience and to de-license theatres which were mismanaged. One writer lamented that the government failed to recognize its duty to enforce regulations. He went on to suggest that it should inspect halls on a regular basis (Sitaramaiah 1946: 28). Why couldn't the municipal authority do something about the dog menace in the theatres, a reader wondered (Bhadram 1951: 39). It was repeatedly claimed that supervising authorities such as the police, health officials and even district collectors were accepting bribes in the form of free tickets and in return permitted exhibitors to break all rules at will. In the words of one writer, the sanitation department 'shuts up if a complimentary pass is thrown at it' (Rangarao 1947: 16). A theatre manager inadvertently lent credibility to the accusation of corruption by officials when he complained to *Roopavani* that a government doctor 'misbehaved' on the theatre premises when the management refused to give free passes to his *neighbour's family*. He added that out of respect for the medical profession, the management had given the doctor's family free passes on this as well as a number of occasions in the past (Mukundappa 1951: 38). A reader pointed out angrily that the failure of government officials was symptomatic of a larger problem:

Officials do not prevent overbooking because [these officials] watch films free of cost. They feel watching films free is their right. Watching a film free is as big a crime as taking a bribe of Rs.100. Moreover these officials also receive bribes in cash. Corruption is increasing in all departments. *Swarajyam* [independence] has come only to government officials, not for the ordinary people. Even in the days of the white government bribery was not so rampant (Satyasree 1951: 39).

The perceived nexus between corrupt government officials and theatre management ensured viewers could not address their grievances to the government. The regime of complimentary passes was not only perceived as bribery but also a denial of the viewers' right of entry-it ensured that the best seats in a theatre were reserved for government officials. One reader sarcastically noted, 'The Floor [class] is full of spit, Bench bug-infested and Chair-Reserved full of officers' (Narayana 1951: 39).

The special privileges accorded to officials included delaying the commencement of the screening for their sake. There was considerable disquiet among authors/readers on this count. It was argued that the viewer had a *right* to see the film according to the scheduled time (Rangarao 1947:17). It is important that we see the demand for adherence to a time schedule as something more than a demand for efficient and disciplined exhibition practices. By holding up the screening for an official, theatre management gave the impression that hundreds of customers-who (unlike officials) had *paid* to see a film-were of no consequence in determining the timing of the programme. Clearly the rights of bona fide customers to be entertained was being denied in the process. Unlike other violations of audience rights-which seem to have affected all categories of viewers to some extent and were thus not discriminatory-the practice of delaying screenings created a hierarchy among viewers, in which middle class viewers were as low as the lower class audiences. Unlike the difference in the level of comfort, this hierarchy was not supported by the capitalist-democratic principles which were fundamental to the cinema.

The objection to conferring special privileges should not, however, be read as the middle class audience's willingness to honour the principle of equality (among all viewers gathered before the screen). As I shall show in the subsequent sections, the articulate sections of the audience recognized the need to maintain hierarchies and segregate different sections of the audience in cinema halls. The writers, I argue, saw themselves as campaigners for the rights of the filmgoers in general even as they demanded that certain sections of the audience be treated as being distinct.

In the *Roopavani* articles/letters there was a general consensus that the viewer had certain rights: comfort and sanitation were widely recognized as the most important. The articulation of viewers' rights in *Roopavani* can be traced back to discussions of the cinema in the *Madras Mail* in the late thirties. According to the *Madras Mail*'s cinema editor, 'Whether you pay two annas or two rupees for a seat you are the patron and you have a right to demand the best type of film entertainment.' (July 23, 1938: 12). Despite the seeming finality of the assertion that *all* viewers had rights, the issue at hand was not so simple and could not be resolved all that easily. For the issue at hand was not simply one of a campaign for the (consumer) rights of the filmgoers in general. Since the cinema hall was a space shared by disparate caste-class groups, the perception of diversity among audiences led to interesting formulations on rights. We need to distinguish between two kinds of rights, both of which are relevant to the *Roopavani* discussions: consumer rights and political rights. Consumer rights—such as the right to comfort, sanitation, etc.—are a major issue with the middle class public, as are political rights: the right to belong (to a public sphere) and also the right to dignity figure in *Roopavani* discussions, particularly in the letters columns. It is worth noting that the discourse generated by the middle class public is a response to a form of mobilization which seems to resist submission to norms of 'decorum' and 'decency'. Much to the dismay of *Roopavani* contributors, the lower class audience's mobilization occurred in spite of the flagrant violation of certain rights. Indeed, the middle class public often came to the conclusion that violation of rights did not seem to be an issue at all with the majority of the audience.

## Audience

In addition to theatre management and government officials, it was often pointed out, sections of the audience contributed to the sorry state of cinema halls. Middle class responses were shaped to a considerable degree by acute awareness of the presence of the lower class—caste other in cinema halls. The cinema hall was perceived as a space within which the respectable member of a 'public' came face-to-face with a collective, a mass, which was an object of curiosity/contempt. The distinction that emerged between the audience at large and a section of 'enlightened' viewers who constituted themselves as a public is critical for discussions on the nature of cinema's audience. Decades before *Roopavani* created the space for the debate on cinema halls, one unusually sympathetic observer of this object wrote:

He [the 'Indian viewer'] attaches little value to acting and loves very little to see whether a story is pertaining to life or not. To be short[,] the most popular film with him is that which is cramped with all sorts of impossibilities.... He has his own darlings and if they appear on screen he will shout and clap his hands with joy so as to startle the few people sitting in the high price seats behind him.

These simple people are mostly to be found in the two-anna pit in our local cinemas. They sincerely believe that their favourites truly perform all the extraordinary feats shown on screen. To argue with them and say that their favourites are only acting and could not really do any of those stunning feats is very dangerous. Some hundred champions will rise up and defend their favourite hero or heroine. You cannot convince them. They will silence you with their hooting (Krishnayya 1923: 5).

Notice the smooth transition between the individual viewer to the collective and the

difference between the author and 'them'. They are poor, male, like the wrong kind of films ('cramped with impossibilities') and are members of a *non-public* because they are ignorant of the norms of public conduct and decorum. The narrative makes it amply clear that the excessive, childlike mass of viewers inhabits the same space as the 'reasonable' subject-in such close proximity that a one-to-one discussion is conceivable, even if it is not possible- and the class of respectable viewers who presumably know the 'value of acting' and recognize 'stories pertaining to life'.

The coming together of the middle class viewer and the 'simple people' caused considerable discomfort to the former. One reader of the *Madras Mail* wrote, 'The people, in their anxiety to purchase tickets, fall on one another, tear the shirts of others and pick the pockets of others' (June 18, 1938: 12). He suggested 'the construction of an additional booking office for the lower classes alone. These [sic] can be used when there is a big crowd of patrons. The *public* will be grateful for these amenities (emphasis added).' The public, it is implied here, is constituted by non-lower class 'patrons', while the unruly behaviour of the 'non-public' necessitates separate booking offices. The duty of theatre management, it was suggested, was the efficient control or *management* of the middle class public's 'other' which gathered in strength at cinema halls so that the public was to be spared the discomfort of coming into close contact with it.

In *Roopavani* readers and columnists noted that the queue system was non-existent. One writer pointed out that this could have numerous negative consequences: financial loss due to picked pockets and torn clothes and a thriving black market of tickets (which allegedly resulted in an income of Rs. 50 to black marketers in towns like Vijayawada). It could lead to loss of life, he cautions, as was the case in Swaraj Talkies, Tenali, where a 40-year old woman was killed in a stampede for tickets to the film *Samsaram/Family* (L.V.Prasad, India/Telugu, 1950) (Sarma 1951: 34) [10].

These complaints notwithstanding, it is possible to argue that the hall owners did take the responsibility of audience management rather seriously, although this may not always have been to the liking of the middle class customers. Notice the complaints of 'rowdiness' by hall owners: I suggest this accusation is a pointer to the ongoing efforts of managements at crowd control. Cinema halls in Andhra continue to be heavily policed even at present and theatre staff often subject viewers to physical violence (Srinivas 1996). It becomes evident from the *Roopavani* discussions that the current practice of threatening the audience or actually subjecting it to violence has a long history indeed. The film industry itself recognized the need for policing the audience as early as 1939 as is seen in Resolution 30 of the first session of the Indian Motion Picture Congress (held in May 1939):

In view of the various taxes levied by the Government on the Cine industry, this Congress requests the Central Board of Governors to approach the Provincial Governments and Indian States to secure adequate police help to cinema theatres free of charge to stop pick-pocketing, sale of tickets outside booking windows and to *maintain peace and order* (*Talk-A-Tone* December 1939: 7, emphasis added).

The need to 'maintain peace and order' at the cinema hall is seemingly self-evident. Going by the reports in *Roopavani* it is likely that hall owners put in place an extra-legal mechanism to manage the audience even as they sought the intervention of the regular police force. One reader reported that the management of Poorna Theatre, Vizag, lathi charged the 9 anna ('Bench') Class audience which was already agitated that the screening of a newly released film began even as people were buying tickets for this class (Ratiraju 1951: 39). Another alleged that the police were bribed to thrash to pulp any one who 'rebelled' against the misdeeds of the management (Anon. 1952: 32). Yet another wrote about an incident in which theatre staff beat up students. He went on to add that the management had these students arrested when they retaliated (Krishna 1952: 60). When the police repeatedly cane-charged crowds which had gathered in large numbers to catch a glimpse of the stars attending the



hundred day function of *Balaraju/Balaraju* (G.Balaramaiah, India/Telugu, 1948) a *Roopavani* journalist stated that the violence was uncalled for and accused the police of acting at the behest of a theatre management (Deshpande 1948b: 68) [11]. There was thus a considerable degree of concern about the physical abuse of sections of the audience as well as the connivance of the police with theatre management.

The key to crowd control, the *Roopavani* discussions would suggest, did not lie in the arbitrary use of the cane, because the problem at hand was rather complex. What was all the more unforgivable was that management often lost their sense of discretion and gratuitously thrashed *every one*, including the upper class customers. Management for their part attempted, perhaps unsuccessfully, to ensure that the middle class audience was exempt from its heavy handed audience-control measures by introducing advance booking of seats for higher classes. Advance booking can also be seen as a means of ensuring that the higher-class customers were spared the discomfort of mingling with crowds of unruly ticket seekers at booking counters and theatre entrances. However, a reader complained that the system did not work and alleged that management sold the tickets for new films twice over and returned the money collected from customers who booked in advance (Bhaskararamarao 1951: 48). Another drew attention to a cane charge by theatre staff to control the crowds at the entrance. He complained that in the process even Balcony and Chair Class viewers who had booked tickets in advance received injuries because the management did not open the gate which was exclusively meant for the higher classes (Sarathy 1950: 43).

Regardless of the success or failure of advance booking, it was not possible for the respectable viewer to avoid coming into contact with an unruly mass and suffering the consequences. More than the management, it was argued, the audience itself was responsible for the conditions in theatres. Sections of the audience 'committed nuisance' in theatres: they littered the auditorium, spat on freshly whitewashed walls, ignored 'No Smoking' and 'Silence Please' signs, threw unextinguished butts on the floor and threw confetti at the screen when their favourite stars appeared. The breaking of rules by some caused the suffering of all filmgoers (Rangarao 1947: 18). One writer observed that purchasing tickets for a new film was like participating in a wrestling match. Indeed the audience lacked discipline and misbehaved. 'We need to realize that standing in a queue is not an affront to our dignity', he pleaded (Sarma 1951: 37). Adding to the general discomfort, women brought infants who wailed at crucial points in the film. Recollecting the scene created by an orthodox woman ('sanatana stree') when a male viewer accidentally touched her, he concludes by saying that those who don't know how to conduct themselves in public should not come to the cinema.

There seemed to have been little doubt that the lower class segment of the audience created a range of problems. To cite an example, it was claimed that when a new film was released, 'the Floor and Bench Class [the two lowest classes] people display animal behaviour' (Satyasree 1951: 38) [12]. It is because 'we' (the pronoun is used), the audience as a group, also comprises Floor and Bench Class people who are incapable of managing themselves that the 'we' have to suffer. Not surprising, then, is the lament that *we* are responsible for the mismanagement of cinema halls. Simultaneously, there is also the assertion that 'we' are a public, but 'they' are just masses and are incapable of constituting a *public*.

Why, according to the contributors of *Roopavani*, are the cinema's audiences not a public? As I have shown above this is partly because it was felt there was a section of the audience which did not know or follow the norms of public decency and decorum. More importantly, the public failed to bring pressure on management to make improvements in viewing conditions. Instead, a writer noted with regret, 'viewers flock to theatres when new films are released, without bothering about their condition. They never make complaints to the management' (Rangarao 1947: 15). As a consequence, the management treats lower class audience like cattle and gets away with it, he lamented. It was felt that the 'craze' for the cinema was an important reason for the state of cinema halls:

People travel to towns on carts and trains from far away places to watch films...

The growth in cinema halls is not proportionate to the growth in people's interest in the cinema. For this reason people are thronging to halls in cities. Theatre [management] are taking advantage of the craze for cinema and indulging in atrocities (Sastry 1951: 38).

Another writer said,

Hall owners have become anarchic ('nirankusatvamga tayarayyaru') because they are confident that audiences will flock to halls when new films are released. The situation will not improve if audiences remain like mute, stupid morons. They should tell proprietors to provide facilities and boycott theatres if they fail to do so (Rao 1947: 26).

In retrospect, the boycott call, made by some subsequent writers as well, was rather premature. Going by the observations of the participants in the discussions, the audience as a group was incapable of responding to such a call because it was *ignorant of its rights* (Rangarao 1947, Rao 1947). A reader listed the problems with a local cinema hall and added, 'No one questions [the management]' ('Tenali Prekshakudu' 1951: 39). The 'backwardness' of the audience was seen as a symptom of a much larger problem according to a reader who noted with regret, 'Our people do not know the responsibilities of a citizen.' The reader added that the cinema hall was only one of the public places-the railway station and bus stand being others-where people behaved in an uncivilized manner (Satyasree 1951: 38).

There can be little doubt that theatre management refused to acknowledge that the audience, particularly the lower class audience, had any rights whatsoever. In fact, a number of cinema halls were run as if they were nothing more than real estate investments. A cinema hall manager reportedly used one of the rooms to rear 'dogs, hens and sheep' (Rao 1952: 18). One theatre owner used two large dogs, instead of gatekeepers, to watch over the main gate ('Students' 1952: 34). Readers referred to fights erupting in cinema halls between theatre staff and the audience (see for example, Sarathy 1950, Ratiraju 1951 and Krishna 1952). Some pointed out that managers turned abusive or violent when viewers complained to them (Lakshminarayana 1951). The point is not whether the audience was passive, but that it is perceived to be so by a large majority of the participants in the discussion. It is imperative for the middle class discourse to construct the audience in general as passive and mobilization of the 'masses' as a sign of innocence or irrationality in order to create a space for the civil societal intervention. Interestingly, the discursive construction of the audience as passive occurs at a time when non-middle class audiences often responded violently to the manner in which management were running cinema halls. The 'public', condemned as passive and 'ignorant of rights', were those who resisted or rejected the film viewing protocols that were being put in place by the middle class public.

In view of the perception of the total failure of the audience in general to protect its own rights, the responsibility of bringing about improvements in cinema halls was passed on to viewers' associations. A *Roopavani* editorial titled, 'Cinema Prekshaka Sanghalu Vardhillali' ('Long Live Film Viewers' Associations') declared, 'When viewers' associations grow strong, good films and good theatres will automatically become available to us' (September 1950). One viewer felt that by forming an association viewers could effectively put an end to the 'anarchy ['arachakam'] of these rich people [theatre owners]' (Visweswararao 1951: 36).

'Prekshakula Sanghalu' or viewers' associations were reportedly formed in almost all major towns and cities of Andhra and individual associations were affiliated to a state-wide body by the early fifties (Bikshalu 1951: 39). It is likely that these associations were either branches of the Andhra Pradesh Film Fans' Association (APFFA, established in 1947) or became affiliated to it over a period of time. According to Turlapati Kutumba Rao, secretary of APFFA between 1963-80, the association promoted good cinema by giving away awards to the best film, actor, director, etc. [13] The following resolutions, adopted by the 'Bandaru Chalanachitra Prekshaka Sangham' ('Bandaru Film Viewers Association') in 1946, give a

fairly clear idea about the agendas of such associations:

1. It is regrettable that films addressing current needs are not being made in Telugu.
2. As far as possible film theatres of the Andhras should boycott Tamil films.
3. At least now Telugu filmmakers should stop making films in Tamil.
4. Andhra producers should make at least ten Telugu films per year.
5. Non-Andhras should not be given roles in Telugu films...

(Letter by the secretary of the association, dated 21st October 1946, *Roopavani* January 1947: 45).

Notably, these resolutions, which demonstrate the association's commitment to a variant of linguistic nationalism, do not address local issues such as the conditions in cinema halls. The refusal to take up local issues seems to have been a characteristic feature of most associations and was severely criticized by readers. One reader citing a news report, which stated that Bezawada Gopala Reddy, Minister for Finance, lent his support to viewers' associations, claimed viewers' associations did not pay attention to the plight of the audience in the cinema hall. He asked them to 'wake up and prevent atrocities being committed in cinema halls and take action on errant theatre management (Bikhsalu 1951: 39). Another accused members of associations of being interested only in becoming office bearers-posts which were in any case merely decorative (Bhadram 1951: 39). Yet another felt that associations should be formed in every town and should ensure, that 'there is no overbooking, obstruction to road traffic, black-marketing, exhibition of indecent films and prevent pick-pocketing which happens frequently near halls' (Satyasree 1951: 39). In short, viewers' associations were mandated to act on behalf of the audience and solve practically all the problems faced by the latter. Even when readers expressed dissatisfaction with the functioning of these organizations they were confident that viewers' associations were capable of bringing about a transformation of theatres. I suggest that unlike disparate groups which comprised the cinema's audience, associations were seen as being recognizably *public*-the form of the collective was geared to functioning in the public domain and the members were, presumably, responsible citizens who knew their rights and responsibilities.

## Illegitimate Transactions

The September 1951 issue of the journal published a letter from the secretary of the 'Tenali Prekshaka Sangham'. It stated that the association's members realized that they hadn't done anything for the town and arranged a meeting with local exhibitors. As a consequence of the meeting, it was reported, theatre management made the following assurances: booking counters would be opened one hour before the screening and theatres would avoid overbooking; when new films were released audience would be made to form queues-with the help of the police-and only one ticket would be issued per person; separate counters would be opened for women; when new films were released counters would be closed as soon as the hall was filled to capacity; female gatekeepers would be appointed to manage women's entrances; theatre staff would be given one holiday per week and would not be made to work during the daytime; action would be taken on smokers; vendors would not be allowed to hawk their wares during the screening; screenings would start according to schedule (Subbarao 1951: 41-42) [14].

Every issue on which an agreement was reached had featured in earlier complaints in the journal on cinema halls. A key issue that the agreement as well as the complaints made in *Roopavani* drew attention to is discipline: disciplining management; introducing administrative measures targeting specific audience groups-disciplining smokers and lower classes and protecting women-and ensuring an undisturbed/unmediated viewing experience by getting rid of vendors and translators.

Although *Roopavani* did publish articles by women occasionally, women produced none of the writings cited in the course of this paper. And yet, a large proportion of this writing deals with problems faced by female audiences and emphasizing the need to strictly segregate male and female audiences. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1980: 5) point out that separate

enclosures for women were introduced within days of the first exhibition of films in India at Weston Hotel, Bombay. By the 1930s the convention of segregating male and female audiences was very well established indeed [15]. Sri Rama Talkies, Vijayawada, a cinema hall opened in 1940, even today has separate entrances for men and women.

We need to pay attention to the demands to regulate theatre spaces since they are an indication of what the middle class audience found anxiety inducing about cinema halls. These demands also draw attention to the larger problem of managing an assembly of diverse groups of people, some of whom were perceived to have tremendous disruptive potential and some others deserving special protection.

In *Roopavani* there were numerous complaints that the segregation of the sexes was not strict enough and this laxity led to a number of quarrels between men and women, but, more importantly, caused suffering to womenfolk. One reader wrote that at the local cinema only a six-foot wall separated ladies' and gents' toilets and this led to quarrels between women and men. The height of the wall should therefore be increased, he suggested (Bhadram 1951: 39). Another claimed that the wooden partition separating the men and women's seats had '24 holes', which resulted in the breaking out of quarrels (Narayana 1951: 39). Yet another reader pointed out, 'Only a six foot high tin screen separates men and women. This is immensely useful for some men. Since the height of this tin sheet is low, men reach over the sheet and derive great pleasure from [feeling] the body parts of women' (Apparao 1951: 76).

The potential threat emanating from unregulated mingling of sexes, but also classes and castes, was projected as a threat to women. Indeed the supposed threat to women was often cited as an important reason for demanding a more efficient management of the space of the cinema hall to ensure that different categories of the audience did not come into close contact. It was argued therefore that women ought to be provided additional or special facilities. The absence of basic facilities like toilets was cited as the reason for women's reluctance to visit some theatres (Hanumantharao 1948: 52). Most readers/columnists who discussed the problems of women saw the absence of separate booking counters for women or the absence of female booking clerks and gatekeepers as a serious problem. Indeed it was almost taken for granted that such arrangements were necessary but some readers provided an explanation anyway. One reader claimed that male gatekeepers abused each other in foul language regardless of the presence of women and also blew smoke in women's faces. All this, he added, was very insulting for women (Ramanadas 1951: 19). Another argued that 'rowdies' indulged in hideous activities because there wasn't a separate booking counter for women (Niranjan 1951: 35). According to another reader, 'booking clerks at ladies' counters press the hands of innocent women' ('Bhalaki' 1951: 37).

Evidently, an attempt was being made to lay down the ground rules creating suitable conditions for women to enter the space of the cinema hall. Such a move became necessary not only because the cinema hall witnessed unseemly quarrels between the sexes, but also because this space was perceived as the field of the male, often the lower caste-class other, and marked by his gaze. The problem, it seems, was not just the threat that came in the form of 'rowdies' and theatre staff who doubled as molesters, but also the *look* of the other-which was itself insulting/threatening to women, according to the men who represented them. The other was often, though not always, the lower class male. One reader felt that separate booking counters for women and female staff were required because (male) theatre owners and staff loitered near women's gates, presumably staring at 'ladies' (Visweswararao 1951: 20). Another stated that due to the absence of a separate women's gate they had to use a gate near which 'our fashionable men stand and pose for women ['pojulistaaru']'. He added, 'Poor women, they have to put up with this since they have [no option but to] pass this way' ('Tenali Prekshakudu' 1951: 39). There was, therefore, a felt need to ensure the prohibition of the look of the lustful male. A reader put it rather dramatically when he stated: 'Every evening a fat youth sits near the ladies gate and stares at women. His stares must be reduced' (Rajeswar 1951: 36). Some years before the column on cinema halls was started, a *Roopavani* journalist drew attention to the lack of facilities for women. His list of absent

facilities included the non-existence of female booking clerks and gatekeepers. He called for separate seats for women which ought to be located in such a way that '*women are not seen by men*' (Deshpande 1948a: 44).

Such a seating arrangement would also go a long way in preventing what some readers called 'romances' (the English word is used) in cinema halls, particularly in the highest priced seats (Sarma 1951: 36-37, Apparao 1951: 76). One reader wondered if the 'Box' class was exclusively meant for this purpose (Bhadram 1951: 38). 'Romance' is glossed by a reader as the deeds of 'some gatekeeper with a whore' in the chair class (Narin 1951: 36).

The larger problem, presumably, was that the cinema hall facilitated a range of activities which the middle class public thought were undesirable. Some of these were a direct fallout of the mixing of diverse groups and the sexes in this space. In this regard, two points need to be noted. Firstly, the demand for the strict segregation of women was simultaneous with the call for separating the diverse classes of viewers. To the extent that at times the same letter or article mentioned both demands (Niranjan 1951; Visweswararao 1951). Secondly, despite the listing of problems caused by lower classes and difficulties or threats faced by women, this section of the audience was not asked to stay away from cinema halls. There was a tacit recognition of the 'right' of both women and the lower class audiences to be present at the cinema hall. Certain transactions that were taking place due to the presence of lower classes and/or women at the theatre, however, had to be prevented. By transactions I do not mean physical assault by booking clerks who 'pressed the hands of innocent women' or rowdies who pulled at the saris of women etc, but the possible traffic of looks between 'ladies' and men, who have no business to even *see* them, let alone gawk at and 'pose' for them.

Who were these suffering women? There is a distinct difference in the way lower class women and respectable 'family ladies' ('samsara streelu') are presented in the *Roopavani* discussions. With the exception of Sarma (1951), none of the readers targeted upper caste/middle class family women ('ladies') in their writings. On the contrary, noisy women or those who were irresponsible enough to bring babies into the cinema hall were almost always seated in the bench or floor classes (see for example Rao 1948). Further, it is suggested the 40-year old woman who died in Swaraj Talkies while trying to get a ticket was from a non-middle class background (Satyasree 1951). One reader complained that due to overcrowding of the floor class, women who had floor class tickets were made to sit with men in bench and chair classes. He added that the theatre in question in any case did not have separate seats for women (Mallikarjunarao 1952: 47). His objection was therefore to the elevation of lower class women to better seats, although in this particular instance the theatre management was trying to save these women from the inconvenience of finding themselves places to sit in an already overcrowded class. Unlike these women, the suffering woman who deserves our sympathy and needs to be protected from the lustful men-this list includes booking clerks, gatekeepers, theatre owners as well as lecherous viewers-in the cinema hall is almost always the married middle class/upper caste woman. Narin (1951) argued that while the gatekeepers brought whores into the first class, some theatre owners followed women who went to cinema halls-even if they were family ladies-whistled and kissed their hands or did other such despicable things, 'without bothering about the disturbance they were causing to the viewers in the hall' (36).

Additionally, there were other activities within cinema halls that were not as anxiety inducing to the middle class audience, but had to be prevented all the same. These included hawking (of tea, cigarettes/*beedis* and eatables) during the screening and the practice of translation (of non-Telugu films) by the translator. As pointed out above, hawkers were seen as a nuisance because they sold their wares noisily throughout the screening [16]. The demand that they be prevented from selling tea etc. during the show-which also figured in the meeting between theatre management and the viewers' association in Tenali cited above-is one of a series that was aimed at evolving certain protocols of viewing. Starting films on time, ensuring that doors were not frequently opened-particularly during matinees when light fell on the screen, reducing the noise level of certain sections of viewers (namely lower classes, women and

children), etc. were measures of this kind. Linda Williams (1994) points out that the very first Hollywood film which insisted on closing booking counters before the film actually started and shutting the doors of the auditorium during the screening, practices which later became institutionalized in USA, was *Psycho* (USA, Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). She argues that the disciplining of the audience by the filmmaker was rewarded by the thrills of the film. The case of *Psycho* demonstrates that the putting together of the protocols of viewing involves players other than the middle class public. What is interesting about the Andhra context is that sections of the middle class audience took on a responsibility which is often the prerogative of the film industry. One reader mentioned that a film viewers' association showed the following slide at the local cinemas: 'People should form queues at booking counters' (Anon. 1950: 16). To cite a recent example that points to an industry sponsored attempt at disciplining the audience, the production company of Gulzar's *Hu Tu Tu/ Hu Tu Tu* (India, Hindi, 1999), Time Audio/Video, distributed posters to cinema halls during the release of this supposedly 'purposeful' film listing activities that the audience should not be indulging in-smoking, buying tickets in the black-market, etc. In a sense, the protocols of viewing are drawn up by different agencies in response to specific viewing contexts.

The letter from the Tenali Prekshaka Sangham states that one issue-the only one according to the letter-which remained unresolved was doing away with translators of Tamil and Hindi films. Managements refused to do so, but agreed to reconsider their decision at a later date. It is likely that the translator was thus quite popular with sections of the audience. Why then would a viewers' association demand that the practice of translation of films in languages unfamiliar to the audience be stopped? The translator, called *dubashi* in Telugu, was a carry over from the silent era when narrators/translators read out inter-titles for the benefit of viewers who were either illiterate or did not know the language in which inter-titles were written. It was noted in the *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-28* [ICC Report] that the translators did much more than read out or translate inter-titles. A High Court Vakil from Ellore [now Eluru], Diwan Bahadur M.Ramachandra Rao Pantulu, examined by the committee said, 'He [translator] is a very clever fellow. He knows all about the story. Then as soon as one scene is on, he explains the whole thing in Telugu because everyone cannot read what is on the film' (ICC Report, III: 251). The chairman of the Indian Cinematograph Committee said of the translator: 'We were told that such a man is a nuisance' (ICC Report, III: 251). Although Pantulu, the witness cited above, disagreed with him, the chairman had obviously heard complaints against the translator from other witnesses. It is possible that there had been a history of opposition to the practice of live narration since the silent era. (See Baskaran (1996) and Hughes (1996) for a discussion of translators in the silent era).

Translators, who were often performers in their own right, gave performances that were not and could not be censored. There is some evidence to suggest that they had considerable freedom to indulge in 'obscenity'. Film critic Inturi Venkateswara Rao says that the translator, who gave a running commentary on the film in the silent era, often used swear words. He recollects a quarrel he once had with a translator who called the mythological character Kamsa a bastard [17]. Actor and film historian Mikkilineni Radhakrishna Murthy recollects that the translator also introduced stars as and when they appeared, often recalling their characteristic traits and heroic deeds performed in earlier films [18]. Barnouw and Krishnamurthy assume that 'the Indian narrators largely disappeared with the coming of sound' (1980: 46, n19). The references to the translator in *Roopavani* leave no doubt that the practice of live translation of Hindi/Tamil films was current even in the early fifties. Well into the talkie era translators continued to provide popular but 'objectionable' interpretations of films, taking liberties with the 'original' dialogue that must have been evident to sections of the audience who followed the language in question. One writer claimed that translators were incompetent in both Telugu and Hindi/Tamil and were not beyond providing comic translations of tragic scenes ('Ushasree' 1949: 45).

There were other objections as well. A reader said that the translator stood before the screen like a pole, obstructing the view and, moreover, he and his ten friends, who accompanied

him, were more interested in passing comments on women than telling the story (Jeevan 1948: 61). Evidently, the objection to the translator was founded on the perception that he was a distraction, an obstruction to the comprehension of the film [19].

Specific complaints about translators, or vendors for that matter, need to be understood as constituting the larger attempt at ensuring that some protocols of film viewing were put in place. Middle class viewers sought to impose restrictions on how the time and space were organized in the cinema hall to ensure that certain activities and practices did not take place. Significantly, there was an attempt to define a duration of time as film time during which nothing but 'pure', unmediated film viewing took place. No talking, clapping, shouting, no drinking/selling tea etc., no staring at women and no translations. In short, a desire for a 'private' mode of film viewing, a mode which evacuates, figuratively speaking, everyone but the responsible film viewer from the cinema hall and prohibits every activity which foregrounds the collective nature of film going. These protocols were fundamental for the middle class viewers' definition of the nature and purpose of the cinema and film viewing. The founding assumption of the guidelines was that film viewing was not, in its existing form, a public activity at all. In the next section I look at arguments in support of the cinema to draw attention to the conditions imposed upon film viewing in order that it acquires the status of a public activity.

### **Delimiting a Public Sphere**

Let me return to P. Gopala Krishnayya's article on the (lower class) audience (*Madras Mail*, August 18, 1923: 5). Significantly, the author suggests that the presence of the lower class audience in cinema halls and indeed their obsession for the medium is *desirable* because:

*Cinema has been an eye-opener to these poor people. They have come to understand good many things [sic]. They are now very familiar with the manners and customs of the West. In a mystery serial they can guess what the mystery is? [sic] They now know about many scientific instruments. Thus the cinema is giving them harmless and cultured pleasure for two-pence and may it long continue to do so (emphasis added).*

The purpose of cinema, according to our ethnographer, is to provide cheap, 'harmless and cultured pleasure' which ensures that the ignorant underclass viewers yearning for escapist fantasies, in spite of themselves, 'come to understand good many things'. Evidently, the progressive, educational effect of cinema is inevitable. In much of the debate on the cinema in print media, the *necessary conditions* for the defense of cinema in general or a given set of films was their potential availability to a large cross-section of society *and* progressive educational or political effect (the spread of the nationalist cause, for instance) on the viewers [20]. I do not wish to dwell on this discussion at any length in this paper except to suggest that the reading of a 'purpose' into cinema may have made it difficult even for the most cinephobic among the middle class to call for a prohibition of cinema. Indeed, the presence of the lower class-castes among the audience is almost taken for granted-it was not something one could agitate against.

A crucial maneuver for gaining control over the medium was by way of generating/reinforcing a normative discourse that elaborated on the rationale for watching films and the permissible transactions within the cinema hall. It is therefore not surprising that writings on the conditions in cinema halls provided the occasion to dwell on the reason why people supposedly go to the cinema and the kind of films they should be watching. The *Talk-A-Tone* editorial on theatres in Madras (cited above), for example, stated:

Theatres are primarily intended for entertainment. It [sic] is a place where the people go to relax themselves with ease and comfort and at the same time enjoy something good enough for the mind and the brain. *A sound mind in a sound body* may appear to be only a proverb, but this is the very thing the theatres

should strive to attain. While something good enough for the mind is given in the shape of entertainment, they should also see that the physical being of the audience is not jeopardized. As it is our Theatres-the *city theatres hardly fulfil* this elementary requirement...*Awful* is the word to describe them in a word (*Talk-A-Tone*, 5/11[December 1941]: 5-6. Original emphases).

'Entertainment' itself is defined in such a manner that the cinema's ability to provide 'relaxation' is invariably linked with the medium's pedagogic potential. To cite an example from *Roopavani*, one writer began by claiming, 'Cinema provides comfort to mankind'. He went on to add that by increasing the number of cinema halls the populace was 'likely to acquire some knowledge ['konta gnanam']'. He concluded by saying that mythology-films should be done away with in Telugu cinema ('by doing so a path to knowledge will be opened for the people') and simultaneously the number of films and theatres should be increased, 'Only then will film art in independent India develop' (Lakshminarasimhacharya 1948: 22). One reader lamented that people, presumably without class distinction-were talking too much in cinema halls. Halls shake with the noise of wild cheering and whistling. What was more 'indecent' was people clapping and singing along during song sequences. He felt, 'Civilized minds are hurt by all this'. Everyone should learn to remain silent, he concluded, 'Only then will there be an opportunity to easily comprehend sequences which give knowledge and pleasure' (Venkateswarlu 1952: 17). The function of the cinema hall was thus one of providing suitable conditions for the dissemination of knowledge or the 'improvement' of the population at large. Such a definition of the function of the cinema is not only inattentive to the nature of the new medium, but is also founded on the construction of the cinematic audience in general as a non-public, i.e., as a group incapable of acting according to the norms of public behaviour and also incapable of forming public opinion [21].

To understand the implications of narrowing down the public nature of cinema halls to being a venue for disseminating knowledge, nationalism, etc., we need to pay attention to some of the larger issues, which are directly related to the nature of public spaces in the Indian context. Firstly, as pointed out earlier in the paper, it is important to note that public places-from streets to water sources-were, quite literally, not public. Prolonged struggles were waged by those who were excluded from these places to gain access to them. Secondly, at least since the 1920s, the public sphere was formed not only around the print media, but also around a wide range of spaces like railway stations, and theatres/drama halls, both of which were being used for explicitly political purposes at times [22]. M. S. S. Pandian (1995) argues that the self respect movement in Madras, in addition to publishing books, pamphlets etc. and thereby intervening in the 'authorized public sphere', also stepped into 'a sphere saturated with the politics of everyday life'. Its spaces included the street, temple and railway station where the movement asserted the right of lower castes to be *physically present* in these places, a right which was denied to them (389).

Given this history of contest over public spaces, the designation of a specific function to cinema halls has to be seen as an attempt at preventing the deployment of this space for any purpose not approved by the 'public'. In the process, the primacy of journals like *Roopavani* as the site for the formation of *the public* is also asserted. (At this point it is useful to recall the slogan coined by Inturi Venkateswara Rao, editor of the first film journal in Telugu, 'Film journalism is the conscience keeper of the film industry' [cited in Venkateswara Rao 1994: 29]). For it is in the pages of this journal, and not in cinema halls, that we come across responsible members of the public who are at once aware of their rights and responsibilities and at the same time have solutions for the problems at hand. Not surprisingly, the column 'Andhra Pradeshlo Theatrelu' began with an editor's note stating: 'In this column audience's views on the conditions, shortcomings and atrocities in theatres in Andhra Pradesh will be published. Theatre owners may earn the respect of the audience by paying attention to their opinions and bringing about improvements to their [readers'/viewers'] satisfaction' (*Roopavani* July 1951: 19). These viewers are a far cry from their counterparts who are driven like cattle in cinema halls. The key maneuver for the formation of the public is the



positing of a non-public that is incapable of conducting itself in the public domain.

The *Roopavani* discussions on cinema halls had interesting consequences. When Satyanarayanamurthy (1949) dwelt upon the problems of theatres in Vijayawada, he suggested that he was dealing with an exceptionally bad set of theatres and that the cinema halls in other cities were better. By 1951 there is a sense that theatres all over Andhra Pradesh, and not just the local ones, were in a pathetic state. There is an increasing awareness of a common set of problems with all cinema halls-barring a few notable exceptions. A majority of contributors in the column 'Andhra Pradeshlo Theatrelu' took it upon themselves to add a certain theatre or a set to the ever-growing list. Further, a number of readers from small towns became participants. So did some readers from relatively lower economic backgrounds who began writing about the plight of the viewers in the 'Bench' class-who, according to one writer cited above, 'displayed animal behaviour' at booking counters-and even exclusively about the problems faced by floor class viewers (Appalaswamy 1951: 46). With the geographical and social expansion of the range of respondents, the middle-class marking of the space opened up by the journal becomes evident. This cannot be attributed to the composition of the readership (whose caste markings are at times evident from the suffixes to their names and class background from the use of English words and phrases) in any simple manner, but a result of the ways in which issues are framed by the journal, a framing that facilitates and even encourages certain responses. While the repetition of the common themes of earlier writings is not unexpected, readers also repeated pithy phrases and proverbs used in earlier writings (see for example, Anon 1951, Apparao 1951 and Ratnam 1951). Some readers struck discordant notes by making strange demands. One reader, for example, complained that the management of a local theatre did not permit replacement viewers (i.e., the entry of someone else in the place of a viewer who wishes to leave during the screening) ('Tenali Prekshakudu' 1951: 40). Another stopped just short of calling for the demolition of theatres (Visweswararao 1951: 20) [23]. These slippages, marking the entry of those still not well versed in the norms of public debate, point to the attractiveness of the space opened up by the journal to readers wishing to become responsible viewers and in the process also gain access to the normative public sphere which, quite literally, laid down the norms of film viewing and theatre management.

The column 'Andhra Pradeshlo Theatrelu', which made readers such experts on theatre management that some of them actually listed the steps that needed to be taken by management and the government [24], allowed every letter writer to emerge as a *representative* of the audience in general. They could speak for, speak about and speak as the audience-something which regular journalists and columnists of the journal had always done. This raises an interesting question about the representativeness of the members of what Pandian (1996) calls the authorized public (in this context: those who wrote in the journal, both journalists and readers-turned-writers). It is by distancing itself from the audience at large-indeed producing it as the other, reinforcing its otherness-that the public acquires the legitimacy to represent the audience in its totality. The members of our public are at once a part of and distinct from the group they come to represent. There is a gap and constant tension between the two subject positions. Stephen Hughes draws attention to the fact that Indians deposing before the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) in 1927-28 often spoke about Indian audiences in the third person (Hughes 1996: 222). I suggest that this observation points to the manner in which the public sphere shapes itself. In the space offered by the journal, for instance, the speaking subject almost always dwelt on a general condition. He almost never spoke for himself, even when it is evident that personal experiences at the local cinema hall were being cited. It was essential that the reader of the journal presented himself as a member of the audience-no one claimed that they did not watch films, unlike those deposing before the ICC-and represents the group by distancing himself from it. Manohar Reddy (1999), in his analysis of the writings on cinema halls in *Roopavani*, makes the interesting suggestion that the authors emerge as embattled and lonely individuals who stand out in complete contrast to the rest of the audience. The pedagogic intent of the public is no doubt aimed at eliminating the tension between the two positions by uplifting the rest of the audience.

The discussion on cinema halls was coeval with the attempt to gain some degree of control over the kind of films made. Around this time *Roopavani* carried articles in every issue demanding 'better' films. Some of them were actually addressed to producers and directors (See, for example, Sriharirao 1946). Further there were repeated calls-echoing similar statements in a range of journals from as early as the 1930s-for the production of 'socials' instead of mythological and folklore films. The former genre has a long history of being associated with reformist nationalism and the mythological and folklore film treated as its regressive other. Scholars studying other contexts point out that the attempt at redefining the exhibition space of cinema involves the demand or support for films which presumably improve the masses (See Kuhn 1988 and Bowser 1990 for studies the English and American contexts respectively). The obverse of such an attempt is in evidence in the poster campaign by Time Audio/Video, cited above. In other words there was a concerted effort to transform the filmic object and the space in which films were watched at the same time. At one level, this was an attempt at vacating the *non-public* from the cinema halls and replacing it with an audience that was also simultaneously a public. Interestingly, from the 1970s, theatre management in Andhra tried, quite literally, to alter the composition of the audience by progressively reducing the capacity of the lower class seats in theatres even as they tried to attract middle class audiences. As far back as 1981, Telugu film journalist K. Narasaiah drew attention to what he considered a disturbing development: exhibitors were reducing the capacity of lower classes and increasing that of higher classes. He warned that this would weaken the industry in the long run although in the short run there was an increase in revenue (Narasaiah 1981: 146). This development came in the wake of the inauguration of the era of air conditioned cinema halls in the seventies. According to B. Srinivasa Rao, Managing Partner of Seshamahal, Vijayawada, the era of air conditioning in Andhra actually began with the introduction of air conditioning in Navrang theatre around 1965. Although there were some air-conditioned theatres in Andhra in the sixties, the construction of the twin theatre complex, Urvashi-Menaka, in Vijayawada in 1970 is a major landmark. Vijayawada has historically been the most important centre for Telugu cinema. Subsequently, numerous air-conditioned theatres and twin theatre complexes came up in different parts of the state even as existing theatres were air-conditioned [25].

Coinciding with this development was the sharp increase of activities of fans' associations, including conflicts between the fans of superstars N. T. Rama Rao and Krishna in and around cinema halls in the seventies. The growth of fans' associations was coeval with a series of political struggles of new constituencies such as tribal communities, landless peasants, Dalits and women. While fan activity needs to be seen in the light of ongoing struggles for citizenship and rights, I argue that it is a manifestation of these struggles in spaces that are not in any obvious manner 'political'. Fans made theatres and contiguous urban spaces the centres of activities with significant socio-political implications. What cannot be ignored is that the cinema's 'public' is a public of *citizens*. Although there are internal differences within this public, which is not exclusively male, upper-caste or middle-class, its members enter the public domain as citizens. On the other hand, fans-whom I have identified as constituents of the mass-audience and non-elite public-are 'non-citizens'. It is important to note that fans' associations drastically expanded the scope of the discourse of rights, by inserting this discourse which was hitherto the prerogative of 'citizens' into a public sphere that was constituted by predominantly poor, often lower caste, young men. As a consequence, the star-nominated by fans as the presiding deity, in a manner of speaking, of this public sphere-acquired enormous political significance. Not because the star had the ability to order this public sphere at will but because *fans* assumed a political role by becoming claimants for rights (Srinivas 1997). After the introduction of a new entertainment tax regime in 1984 (known in industry circles as the slab system) the government permitted exhibitors to reduce the number of seats in the lowest class (where chairs were introduced for the customers in most theatres in the state by the seventies) to just two rows (*Andhra Pradesh Film Diary* 1995). Sridevi (opened in 1997) in the suburbs of Hyderabad is a textbook example of the post slab system theatres. More than a third of the seats of this air-conditioned theatre, which is also equipped with DTS, are in the balcony class. Interestingly, then, even as fan activity became more intense in the eighties, attempts were being made to make cinema halls less

easily available to those sections of the audience to which a large majority of fans belonged. The public nature of theatres was not only underscored by fans, but was also crucially important for the public sphere that fans created. The *Roopavani* discussions should not therefore be viewed as the beginning of the end of democracy-in the sense Chatterjee uses the term: as a form of mobilization-in cinema halls.

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## Notes

1. Published from Madras, the capital of the Madras Presidency/state that included a significant Telugu speaking area. In the post-independence period the Telugu speaking area became a separate Andhra state in 1953 and Andhra Pradesh-with the inclusion of the Telugu speaking areas of the Hyderabad state-in 1956. All quotations from the journal have been translated from Telugu by the author.
2. I have argued elsewhere that non-middle class audience groups too constitute themselves as publics (Srinivas 1997). Although a similar argument could be made in the light of the discussions in *Roopavani*, by examining the traces left behind by those who did not or could not write in the middle class discourse, I focus primarily on the formation of the middle class public.
3. That this perception is not unique to those commenting on the Tamil speaking areas of India is evident from the insistence of Inturi Venkateswara Rao, the editor of the first film journal ever in Telugu, 'Cinema is absolutely democratic' (Interviewed by the author, Chennai, 20th September 1998).
4. Such struggles played a significant role in shaping the Nationalist movement and have been widely documented. M. S. S. Pandian (1995) is particularly useful for my analysis since he draws attention to the critical importance of the contest over physical spaces in the Tamil self respect movement.
5. Based on Prattipati Muttaiah's unpublished survey of Dalit audiences of cinema cited in Srinivas 1997.
6. Chatterjee's formulations on western and non-western modernities need to be qualified. Arguably, both projects are 'incomplete'. Nevertheless 'western modernity' is a crucial abstraction when we look at institutions which are modelled upon (or counterposed to) this construct. Although the project of modernization may be incomplete *everywhere*, the point of Chatterjee's argument is that 'non-western' modernity is 'always incomplete' precisely because at any given point of time western modernity appears complete to the non-west. In other words, the attribution of completeness to the west by the non-west is the issue at hand.
7. See also the essays in Sangari and Vaid (1989) for detailed discussions on the history of the normative subject in India. Tharu and Niranjana's analysis of the invisibility/non-particularity of the normative subject finds an interesting parallel in Richard Dyer's argument about whiteness. Dyer (1997) states, 'Whites are the one particular group that can take up the non-particular position of ordinariness, the position that claims to speak for and embody the commonality of humanity' (222-223). In the *Roopavani* discussions the middle class public's ability to 'take up the non-particular position' is critical for its intervention.

8. I am grateful to R. Prakash, Assistant Librarian, Roja Muttiah Research Library, Chennai, for translating this article from Tamil for me.

9. The reputed exhibitor, Kaza Venkataramayya, was named in a letter (*Roopavani*, Deepavali 1951: 78). G. K. Mangaraju, the first Telugu distributor who also owned theatres in Vizag, was severely criticized by a reader for the poor management of Poorna Talkies (*Roopavani* September 1951: 39-40).

10. This essay is supposedly based on an English essay by 'Mirza'. At least two others referred to the incident in Tenali (Satyasree 1951: 38 and Sastry 1951: 38. Sastry claims that the management of the theatre paid some money to the relatives of the woman and tried to bribe a police inspector in an attempt to hush up the incident. Biskhalu 1951 mentions another incident in Rajahmundry, in which a man broke his leg when a wall collapsed.

11. The incident took place on June 6th, 1948. A columnist writing in the same issue of the journal argued that though the incident was regrettable it was a lesson of sorts to the audience and such cane-charges would result in the emergence of good films, actors and directors ('Murthy' 1948: 7). In 1951 a reader drew attention to a lathi charge at the venue of a similar function, this time on the crowds who came to see the stars of *Patala Bhairavi/Patala Bhairavi* (India, Telugu, K. V. Reddy, 1951). 80 people received injuries according to the reader's report (Pandurangarao 1951: 40).

12. Among others, Niranjana (1951:35) complained that the floor and bench class audience created havoc and Sastry (1951: 39) claimed that due to overbooking, this section of the audience fought with soda bottles for space.

13. Information on APFFA based on an interview with Turlapati Kutumba Rao (Vijayawada, 9th July, 1998) by the author. The APFFA was modelled on the Madras Cine Fans' Association established about a decade earlier.

14. Although the letter mentions 1st October 1951 as the date of implementation of the agreement, whether this negotiated settlement between the association and exhibitors was actually translated into practice is not clear.

15. According to Inturi Venkateswara Rao, the earliest permanent halls in Andhra, constructed in the 1920s, inevitably had separate seats for women, although some educated, upper class women sat with their husbands (information based on an interview by the author on September 20, 1998 in Chennai).

16. The presence of hawkers in theatres was a regular feature of permanent theatres in Madras city in the teens and twenties (Hughes 1996: 102). Even at present there are theatres in large cities, including Hyderabad, where hawkers are permitted to sell their wares inside the auditorium during the interval.

17. Interview, cited above.

18. Interview by the author on 24th June 1998 in Vijayawada.

19. Former distributor and film critic K. Narasaiah for instance argues that the *dubashi* said practically whatever came to his mind, regardless of what was happening on the screen (interviewed by the author on 27th June 1998 in Vijayawada).

20. This argument was repeatedly made after the popularity of cinema grew with the arrival of the talkies. At a convention of producers, exhibitors and distributors held by the Prabhat Film Company in Bangalore, reputed Hindi film director V. Shantaram reportedly 'dwelt at length on the part cinema played in India's social and cultural progress and how the increasing enthusiasm exhibited by the public in the cinema should be properly harnessed to India's national progress' (*Madras Mail*, April 2, 1938: 12). Hughes (1996: 236) points out

that in the ICC Report the most commonly expressed benefit of the cinema, according to those who deposed before the committee, was the medium's educational potential.

21. In the *Roopavani* discussions film itself serves a dual function as a) a form of entertainment, for all sections of the audience and b) medium of indoctrination, for the members of the 'non-public'. The two functions have a rather long history of conflict in Telugu cinema, often presented as an 'industry versus the public' conflict, which in the seventies and eighties provided the ideological foundation for two seemingly conflicting genres, the 'mass film' and 'class film' respectively.

22. In 1923, Southern Railway issued a notification prohibiting the holding of political meetings on railway platforms and railway premises in general (*Madras Mail* July 18, 1923:5). In the same year the first conference of ryots (farmers) in Rajahmundry was held in the Chintamani Theatre Hall (*Madras Mail* June 9, 1923:7).

23. This reader lists the problem with local theatres and sets up cinema halls of Calcutta as a point of contrast: 'In Calcutta all theatres are comfortable. If there is overbooking (in Calcutta) audience will demolish the hall.'

24. See for example Visweswararao (1951: 21), who makes seven suggestions for improving cinema halls. These range from increasing booking offices to the elevation of the flooring.

25. Interview, Vijayawada, 29th January, 1999.

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