

Urban. Village. Urban-Village.

Angaditheru and its 'mofussil' department store society in Chennai

by Michael Christopher & Helen Staufer



Collective teeth brushing in Angaditheru (source: DVD Ayngaran)

Summary:

In the prospering city of Chennai thousands of migrant workers are hired by agents of the big department stores. They move from their villages to the city where they live in own communities. In *Angaditheru*, film director Vasanthabalan depicts their living conditions and shows how they live in a rural society within a big department store and on the adjacent market street. Despite of the urban environment they have limited contact to the city dweller. Here the film creates a sphere in-between urban and rural.

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Migration to the cities is a common problem, especially for developing countries. The pressure of the never-ending stream of fortune seekers to the megapolises of Asia, Africa and Latin America increases constantly. Slums are one face of the modern world. Ashis Nandy describes the slum as “an entity that territorializes the transition from the village to the city” (1998:11-12). The other face of the modern world are migrant workers. A close look to China, the society with the largest number of migrant workers, enlightens, that there are some problems in the transition zone. It is quite a restricted zone, as Dalia Davin shows. She describes, that i.e. construction workers live only among each other and have practically no contact to the urban community (1999:112).

On the other hand, the urban community does not seek for contact, discrimination of migrant workers by urban residents “[...] has widened the social gap between migrant workers and local residents” (Keung Wong [et al] 2007:36-37). The situation in India is somewhat different, because of a less regulated system, but labour migration increases, sometimes as a seasonal phenomenon like in the construction segment (cf. Mosse [et al] 2005:3025), sometimes for longer periods.

While the slum attracts the spectator, as a kind of spectacular cinema, because of its raw stories at the edge of existence, working migration is a more social theme with less pace in its filmic storyline. In Tamil cinema the social genre is quite popular and brings from time to time some amazing films to the movie theatres. *Angaditheru* (India 2010, Vasanthabalan) is one of them. It shows the problem of modern working migration in Southern India.

The film is a good example to have a close look on the sphere between urban and rural. Our article follows the question, how the city and the village can be screened, and how the cinema produces images of city, village, and the sphere in-between. *Angaditheru* creates pictures of an “urban monster”, but also of urban reality. We look at these pictures, try to find the gaps in the images of urbanity and describe the transitions between urban and rural worlds.

The movie



The crowded Ranganathan Street in Angaditheru (source: DVD Ayngaran)

Angaditheru describes the hard life of villagers who are working for one of the big textile stores in T. Nagar in Chennai. Translated *Angaditheru* means Bazar Street, and it is really situated in the Ranganathan Street, which leads from the suburban train station Mambalam to Usman Road in Chennai. It is director Vasanthabalan's third movie. The music is composed by the well established Vijay Antony and G.V. Prakash Kumar, the nephew of A.R. Rahman, and is still popular in Tamil television. In the beginning there is a love story. Lingu (Mahesh) and Kani (Anjali) are fooling around at a bus stop. We still do not know, that their alienation to the other waiting people could be causing of the reason that they are both villagers, no, they seem to be two lovers in their own world.

The happy beginning turns into tragedy. In search of a place to sleep at night, they join some construction workers who are sleeping at the pavement. An accident happens, a heavy lorry is hit by a car and heads towards the sleeping group and crashes into them. A very long flashback enlightens the story of Lingu, how he comes from the village to the city due to financial problems of his family who has lost the father in an accident. A big textile department store at Chennai looks for new employees and goes to the villages to engage poor boys and girls, preferred without fathers. In Chennai the staff lives in a restricted area, controlled by the crew of the department store. The supervisors are despots and there exists no freedom.

Lingu gets to know Kani on his first working day at the store. Slowly they develop feelings for each other. But love stories are not allowed and

though, our couple gets problems which leads them to leave the store. But before they quit, they are fired by the boss, telling Lingu has stolen a valuable sari. So they end up on the streets, try to sell stuff and have to look for a save place to sleep. But the city is no save place, and thus, the story ends in tragedy. Lingu is a good guy, he takes care for Kani who has lost her legs because of the accident, and they survive at Angaditheru (Ranganathan Street).

The City and the Village

According to early film theory, film and urban experience are close connected. Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer describe how the film speaks the language of the city (cf. Larsen 2004:32) especially by the techniques of montage. But more than this, film is no sole urban media, it has found its way to the rural areas, to the smaller towns wide-spread in the country and thus in reach for the many villagers. Sometimes wandering cinema troupes made their stop in a village and showed a movie. And with the genre of *Western* in the United States or *Heimatfilm* in Germany, many genres which took their focus on rural backgrounds. Sundar Kaali (2000:174) describes the long history of the Tamil rural genre of *Nativity* and the emerge of its new form since the mid 1970s. The village attracts the spectator also. Anand Pandian (2008:134) states that “[...]cinema not only generates persuasive representation of the countryside, but also infiltrates these places and their inhabitants themselves as an instrument of imagination and interpretation.”

There are several movies which cross the border between city and country. Most in persona of the protagonist, i.e. when he comes from the city to the village like in *Swades* (India 2004, Gowariker) when Shahrukh Khan comes in search of his former nanny to the village and stays there to improve modern facilities (water reservoir), or *Aayitha Ezhuthu* (India 2004, Ratnam) where Surya forces education and political empowerment to the village people.

Angaditheru crosses the border between city and village several times. First when the film begins in the city, a flash back brings us to the home of Lingu and describes how he comes to the city. While he stays in the city, he

communicates with his family, tells Kani about his first love (an urban girl who came to his village to visit her granny) and Kani tells him about her first love in her village. In his dreams Lingu imagines a life with Kani in his home village.

The beginning: Introduction of the City

At the first pictures of the film, the city seems like a place of joyful life when both characters are playing their games, or annoying their former supervisor Karungali (Venkatesh) while he is passing their way. The spectator gets a glimpse of the city: Pothys¹, shopping malls, overcrowded buses, street hawker and beggars. The pace of the editing gives us an impression of the city. It is fast, pictures appear like flash-lights, no points to orientate oneself. We can see only a cut-out of the city which seems familiar.

In Indian popular cinema there are “[...] several stories of city dwellers in Chennai, Mumbai, Kolkata, but besides stock images of certain landmarks, we would rarely think of [...] a Mumbai-film or [...] a Chennai-Film” tells us Lalitha Gopalan (2002:150). Landmarks are popular to introduce a city and important to locate it (cf. Lynch 1960:48-49). In the majority of cases the city is represented with establishing shots at the beginning, showing its most known sights or its skyline: Big Ben, Brandenburger Tor or a view from the Hudson River. But then the city often vanishes to smaller units like one specific quarter or to private houses. Sometimes the city is the main protagonist like in several European films or Hollywood. The fun of destruction of a city like in Hollywood’s disaster and apocalyptic films are uncommon in Indian cinema.

In Cinema, there are rare shots of landmarks of Chennai. In *Madrasapattinam* (India 2010, Vijay), as an exception, historic pictures of the Central Station are a visual anchor to localize the movie in the historic Madras. *Angaditheru* provides us a different view to the city. Visual landmarks disappear fast, the bazaar street is the main anchor of the film, the people who are working there and who are coming to do their shopping.

Back to village



Marimuthu, Lingu and their friends in the village in Angadithern (source: DVD Ayngaran)

After the accident of the protagonists, the screen fades to white, and when the image reappears, the film brings us back to the beginning of the story, to the native place where Lingu lived before he moved to Chennai. The village differs totally from (the introduction of) the city. The people are sitting in front of their huts, doing their work. Common images of the rural as we expect to see. We descry a dry place somewhere in the landscape from a top point of view: some guys are playing cricket, having fun. The camera uses a wide-angle. The life of the villagers seems untroubled. The school is over and the young men are planning their future as an accident happens. A group of construction workers are killed by an accident with their transport lorry at a railway crossing. Their open truck gets stuck at the railway track when an express train hits it. The young boys are forced to find work, to finance their families, because their fathers as former bread-earners passed away.

Just in time, *Senthil Murugan*, a big department store from Chennai, comes to the village in Thirunelveli district, which is far away from Chennai in the most South of the country. The agents of *Senthil Murugan* are looking for boys who have lost their fathers and have sisters who are going to school. The reason is not charitable, they are looking for employees who are absolutely depending on the wages they will pay. Lingu and his friend Marimuthu (Pandi) who played a role in the “castings” – his father is still alive – get a job.

The village is depicted in deep contrasts. On the one hand, we can see the naïve, easygoing life in the rural, on the other hand, social distinctions, financial dependency and the cruel life of the countryside are appearing on the screen. Doom forces the protagonist to change his plan of studying, an unexpected slump ruined the serenity – we realize, the village is no idyll.

The city after arrival

A night bus brings Lingu and Marimuthu to Chennai. The night is used for transfer and it is also a transitory time. The youth is over – now they are employees. They reach the city at *Chennai Mofussil Bus Terminus* (CMBT)², the largest Bus stand in the city. Most movies uses station buildings as *city-entrée*, but here, unusually, the bus stand is cast as the city-marker. And this is quite near to reality in Tamil Nadu where the bus is the most important public transport system. And even later, the bus is the vehicle which brings the new staff to their new homes.

Out of the view of Lingu, we are beginning to catch first impressions of the city. And these are mostly unattractive pictures: he sees the crowded street, the poverty, the garbage. These initial impressions of Lingu are not our first glimpses of the city. We have seen Chennai already and we think to know what happen to him and Kani. Chennai is no longer a place of personal freedom and joy. We get insight of the inhuman machinery of this semi-fictional department store. Lingu and Marimuthu start their work down in the basement-warehouse where they prepare the textiles for the storage. But they are able to climb the ladder, they think they are promoted, but they come to the most dreaded supervisor of the shop: Karungali.

The village in the city

When Marimuthu realizes at their first day of work, that all the girls he sees are village-girls, his dreams to get in touch with city-girls vanish into thin air. It's the department stores idea of business, to recruit only villagers in financial distress for the jobs, thus all of them depend on the occupation and the loan they pay. These employees will not start a rebellion or join a union, they will do their jobs, and if not they get fired, because there are enough new villagers who are waiting for their chance.

The staff has (normally) no family in town and thus, the department store is their life, where they have to work from early morning to midnight. It is a kind of restricted zone: the canteen, the hostel, the workplace – there is still nothing more than this in the life of the villagers in Chennai, and all is organised by the department store. Charles Lemert (2005:129-130) states according to Herbert Gans' ([1962] 1982) research on urban villagers in Boston's West End and his concept of peer-group societies, that the urban villagers are very traditional and depend on their own groups, that they were unable to see beyond them.

In case of India, Ramakrishna Mukherjee ([1953] 1974:42) differs two groups of rural migrants: rural-urban dichotomy (displaced immigration, people who cut off their connections to home) and rural-urban continuum (maintaining contact with their previous settlement). M.S.A. Rao ([1970] 1974:487-489) defines three different situations of urban impact on villages: working migration, a village nearby an industrial zone, and a village swallowed by a metropolis. In case of migration he sees in his early research, that most workers visit their home four to five times a year (ibid). But in *Angaditheru* it seems that a visit home is just like a dream.

The villagers are collected all somewhere in the South and shifted to Chennai. Now, they have only few chances to get in contact with their home villages. A *mofussil department store society* as peer-group society grows, depending on the rural structures, but without a caste system. They are equal, but low standard, and are able to climb up the ladder, according they serve the system/ supervisor. But they can fall deep, if the system sees no more need in them.

The failed ones live on the streets, try to survive by selling goods. They are villagers, but also the nexus between the urban world and the *mofussil department store society*. They are the connectivity link to the real world. Somehow, their life on the streets is a pre-stage of a slum. The people gather together to be secure but they live on bare ground without building huts.

Urban Monster and Urban Reality

Julie Barillet (2005:13-14) tells us about two different kind of depicting a city in film: to show recognizable places (*décors naturels*). Or, to show the city vague as urban room in studios (*décors de studio*). *Angaditheru* uses a *décors naturels*, it shows the busy shopping district in Chennai's T-Nagar to enlighten the viewers about the social problems of villagers in town. Older Tamil social movies like the films of M.G.R. or Shivaji Ganesan are setted in a studio areal, but today it is necessary to move to the reality. Raw pictures are next to documentaries. *Angaditheru* changes between outside shootings (the streets) and shots inside like the departement store.

There are two kinds of concepts of cities seen in the film. On the one hand it is a kind of "urban monster", on the other hand the urban reality. The "urban monster" is shown with a system of surveillance, attendance clock, CCTV, waiters etc. The freedom of the city can be detected nowhere. It is like the early industrialization or in Charly Chaplin's *Modern Times* (USA 1936, Chaplin) but without any irony. The urban monster gets deep into the private life: it is not allowed to have love stories. The old ones, the invalids and the "dissidents" are deposed to the street like garbage. An other theme, told by the film, is the sexual molestation inside the shop by the supervisor Karungali. The employees are totally exposed to the system.

While the department store as a restricted zone shows no light to the future of the employees, the street-life episodes in *Angaditheru* interrupt the mirthless and fearful atmosphere. While one former employee of the shop whom Lingu met at the street, with cankered legs due to his job behind the sales counter, lies dead on the street someday, most of the street-dweller are able to manage their life somehow. The guy who perceive the dirty toilets in the street starts a business with a pay-and-use toilet by cleaning it up and gets so much money that he will come in first class suburban train coach to "his" toilets and changes his clothes to "poor man's working dress". The wife of the man of short stature who is happy that her child is also of short stature, because no one can doubt about her fidelity. Next to real picture interludes this and many other stories describe some kind of urban reality.

These stories show us the gaps in the urban-rural dichotomy. The suicide of a female vendor in front of the staff, because her lover lied to the supervisor, that he has never loved her, brings the city life to shop. This incident causes bad publicity to the department store. The public seems to catch interest in the conditions of the shop. Thus, the owner forbids any relationship between men and women. But there are more openings in the system: the appearing of movie superstar Sneha (cameo) for a commercial video for the department store is the turning point for Lingu and Marimuthu. While Lingu expresses his love to Kani in a song-and-dance scene and get fired because they were filmed by the CCTV in the night, Marimuthu seizes his chance as fan of Sneha and gets the possibility to work for her as an assistant. And, when Kani's little sister, who works for a family in Chennai, matured, they have to make the ritual for her. They caught the breeze of the city which Lingu wants to follow with his lover.



Lingu is selling Saris in Angaditheru (source: DVD Ayngaran)

It is interesting, that there is such less connection between the employees (villagers) and the customers (city-dwellers) in the movie. They live in two separate worlds, and thus there is a kind of non-communication between the city (clients) and village (shop workers).³ The only medium is the textile, the sari, which the workers never could afford. M.S.A. Rao ([1970] 1974:494) describes how urban villagers are able to participate in two different social situations – the village and the city – at the same time. But his euphemistic these, which implements the social rise of the villager in the city, fails here, because the urban villager in *Angaditheru* lost his kin-networks and wins a new village structure in the city.

There is no rise in social status whether in the city nor in the native village. The connection to the village is limited to letters or phone calls. Later, the more urbanised Marimuthu calls a cell phone his own and offers it to his friend to hold the connection to his village. There, Lingu's little sister dreams of her brother who has set off to the city. In an episode, she asks a couple in a nearby city who carry a bag of Lingu's department store, if she can get this bag and she puts it next to the photo of her dead father. This is the very tragic picture of the movie.

Transitions

The city is for most rural villagers a place of hope, while the village is for many urban villagers – as the place of origin – mystified and glorified as a *fragment mémoire* of a better world (cf. Prasad 2004:98). Film as a transitory media shows transient pictures.

The question is, which cinematic techniques are used to show the transitions between urban and rural. Here, a kind of sphere in-between exists and is tangible for the spectator. First, there are vehicles, crossing the border, to cover a distance. In *Angaditheru* the protagonist uses a bus to come from his village to the city. In Tamil Nadu, it is a common vehicle for transportation. Individual cars are not common, these are mostly been used by city-dwellers, sometimes when they come to the countryside. The train is also a favourite to cross the border. The station is the entrance to a new world, but mainly not the platform of transition itself. The city station is an urban space par excellence with its many tracks, the crowded platforms, and its atmosphere. In contrast, the village station lacks of these images even if it is busy.

Another technique is, to use flash backs like in *Angaditheru*. When Lingu tells Kani about his first love, we can see his trip down memory lane on the screen. And even Kani's love experience is shown as a flashback. The memory is transferred to an image like in Wim Wenders *Until the end of the World* (Germany 1991, Wenders), where memories and dreams are materialised with a machine which is, in reality, the cinema. The memory itself is a medium of transition. The body still rests in the city, but the mind explores the rural life. And when Lingu realises that he is in love with Kani,

a *song and dance scene* appears. It brings us to a fictive place, a mystified village, where he imagines a life together with her.



Lingu dreams of a life with Kani in his village in Angaditheru (source: DVD Ayngaran)

The third technique to show the transition is, to implement the village to the city, or to bring a city-dweller to the village. Both happens in *Angaditheru*. We can see habits of villagers who are living in the city, like solidarity or peer-group socialisation. And in the love story flash back of Lingu, he fell in love with a Chennai-girl who attracts all the village boys until in a comedy scene, Marimuthu detects that she always farts.

Let's come back to our introducing question, on how a city and a village can be screened, and how the cinema produces images of city and village, and important at all, produces images in-between. *Angaditheru* shows the life of villagers who come to Chennai because they have to. It presents different aspects of the city, fast cut scenes, social studies of the protagonists, and many short stories about villagers. The village appears only in flash backs. The camera angle is wide as the landscape, the environment is rural and clean in contrast to the violence and the garbage on the streets of the town.

But most important is the transition between city and rural and how the new surrounding is adopted by the villagers. When they arrive in Chennai, their way goes straight to the department store. Thereafter they have hardly the possibility to leave it. They work, sleep and eat in accommodations of the shop in a very confined area and under permanent strict control. Within this enclosed space the mofussil inhabitants out of various different villages form an own society which give them support in

this strange environment. The villagers barely reach other parts of the city. Many of them relocate in the adjacent road, when they got fired or quitted work by themselves.

Only a few villagers shown in the film succeed and improve their condition by removing to better parts of the city. However, on the Ranganathan street they live similar to the circumstances in the department store. The contact to the city dwellers remains limited to selling situations. The villagers try to survive with the disposal of small goods, wherefore they continue to be dependent on the urban inhabitants. And with them their relatives in the home villages. Also our protagonists Lingu and Kani end on this street. They can control their lives by themselves now, but in-between a city and village life. They are far away from their native villages, but they never really find access to the Chennaiites and live still among villagers. In contrast, Marimuthu is one of the few positive exceptions who managed it to enter the higher society circles by assisting the film star Sneha, but this is rather luck by chance than reality.

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Notes

- ¹ Pothys is the most famous textile department store in Chennai.
- ² In Tamil Nadu suburban and rural areas are called mofussil. There are Mofussil Bus stands for long distance journeys and City Bus stands. Mofussil means literally the places outside the big urban centers in India.
- ³ Albeit according to Watzlawick et al. (1967:51) non-communication is impossible. There is always a deeper meaning in it. Here: to show the two different worlds.