Genealogies of the Citizen-Devotee: Popular Cinema, Religion and Politics in South India

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree
Of Doctor of Philosophy
In the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2011

Abstract

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This dissertation is a genealogical study of the intersections between popular cinema, popular religion and politics in South India. It proceeds with a particular focus on the discursive field of Telugu cinema as well as religion and politics in the state of Andhra Pradesh from roughly the 1950s to the 2000s.

Telugu cinema continued to produce mythological and devotional films based mostly on Hindu myths and legends many decades after they ceased to be major genres in Hindi and many other Indian languages. This was initially seen simply as an example of the insufficiently modernized and secularized nature of the South Indian public, and of the enduring nature of Indian religiosity. However, these films acquired an even greater notoriety later. In 1982, N.T. Rama Rao, a film star who starred in the roles of Hindu gods like Rama and Krishna in many mythologicals set up a political party, contested and won elections, and became the Chief Minister of the state, all in the space of a year. For many political and social commentators this whirlwind success could only be explained by the power of his cinematic image as god and hero! The films thus came to be seen as major contributing factors in the unusual and undesirable alliance between cinema, religion and politics. This dissertation does not seek to refute the links between these different fields; on the contrary it argues that the cinema is a highly influential and

popular cultural institution in India and as such plays a very significant role in mediating both popular religion and politics. Hence, we need a fuller critical exploration of the intersections and overlaps between these realms that we normally think ought to exist in independent spheres. This dissertation contributes to such an exploration.

A central argument it makes is about the production of the figure of the citizen-devotee through cinema and other media discourses. Through the use of this hyphenated word, citizen-devotee, this study points to the mutual and fundamental imbrication of the two ideas and concepts. In our times, the citizen and devotee do not and cannot exist as independent figures but necessarily contaminate each other. On the one hand, the citizen-devotee formulation indicates that the citizen ideal is always traversed by, and shot through with other formations of subjectivity that inflect it in significant ways. On the other hand, it points to the incontrovertible fact that in modern liberal democracies, it is impossible to simply be a devotee (*bhakta*) where one's allegiance is only to a particular faith or mode of being. On the contrary, willingly or unwillingly one is enmeshed in the discourse of rights and duties, subjected to the governance of the state, the politics of identity and the logics of majority and minority and so on. Religion as we know it today is itself the product of an encounter with modern rationalities of power and the modern media. Hence, the modern hybrid formation—the citizen-devotee.

The first full length study of the Telugu mythological and devotional films, this dissertation combines a historical account of Telugu cinema with an anthropology of film making and viewership practices. It draws on film and media theory to foreground the specificity of these technologies and the new kind of publics they create. Anthropological theories of religion, secularism and the formation of embodied and affective subjects are

combined with political theories of citizenship and governmentality to complicate our

understanding of the overlapping formations of film spectators, citizens and devotees.

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Acknowledgements

It is with great pleasure and a sense of relief that I write these acknowledgements—pleasure because I can finally place on record my gratitude to the great number of people who have helped me and sustained me during the course of researching and writing this dissertation, and relief because this has been a very long journey and is finally at an end!I would like to especially mention—

Nicholas Dirks for his intellectual generosity and for being a truly understanding and encouraging supervisor. During my years of graduate training, as head of the department, Nick had,both through the example of his own work, and through bringing together a remarkable group of scholars and students, made the department a most stimulating place to conduct research in the discipline of anthropology and in South Asian studies.

To David Scott, I owe a special debt. David an incrediblythoughtful scholar who spent many hours discussing the ideas for this dissertation at different stages. His constant support and comments on my work have been extremely critical in helping me bring coherence and structure to this work.

Partha Chatterjee, a scholar who never fails to inspire, for his kind encouragement and insightful feedbackthat came at a time when I needed them most.

William Mazzarella for readily agreeing to be part of the defense committee and for bringing in an energetic engagement and a fresh perspective that pushed me to sharpen and refine many ideas in the dissertation.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to Mohana Krishna whose love, companionship and enthusiasm for life and work continue to make each day meaningful. And to Neelima, for bringing so much joy into our lives and teaching me to appreciate anew so many things in life. And for growing old enough to tell me, as I struggled with this thesis, that I should write five pages a day in order to finish it!

For Mohanakrishna and Neelima

Introduction

> Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken
> continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is
> not to demonstrate that the past exists actively in the present, that it secretly
> continues to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form to all
> its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and
> does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex
> course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is
> to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete
> reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that
> gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to
> discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what
> we are, but the exteriority of accidents.

> Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"[1]

Telugu cinema continued to produce mythological and devotional films based mostly on

Hindu myths and legends many decades after they ceased to be major genres in Hindi and

many other Indian languages. The period from the 1950s to the late 1970s witnessed the

successful production of a number of these "religious" films in Telugu. This was initially

seen simply as an example of the insufficiently modernized and secularized nature of the

South Indian public, and of the enduring nature of Indian religiosity. However, these

films acquired an even greater notoriety later. In 1982, N.T. Rama Rao, a film star who

starred in the roles of Hindu gods like Rama and Krishna in many mythologicals, set up a

political party, contested and won elections, and became the Chief Minister of the state,

all in the space of a year. For many political and social commentators this whirlwind

success could only be explained through the power of his cinematic image as god and

hero! Chidananda Dasgupta a prominent film critic remarked, "There was no question of

God not being elected….The cinema has stood the traditional relationship of myth and

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[1] (Foucault 1977)

fact on its head. Myth has become fact. The film star who plays God has become God"
(Dasgupta 1989, 16). This kind of argument assumes it knows the answers to the
questions it needs to probe and explore. It is based on two mistaken views—first, that the
mythological films are full of piety and second, that the film audience is religious and
naive, mistakes the actor for the divine characters he plays on screen and, what is more,
even votes him to power on that basis. The films thus came to be seen as major
contributing factors in the unusual and undesirable alliance between cinema, religion and
politics in this part of the country.

This dissertation does not seek to refute the links between these different fields; on the
contrary it argues that the cinema is a highly influential and popular cultural institution in
India and as such plays a very significant role in mediating both popular religion and
politics. Hence, while we clearly need to move beyond the simplistic explanations offered
by critics like Dasgupta, we also need a fuller critical exploration of the intersections and
overlaps between these realms that we normally think ought to exist in independent
spheres.

Hence, this dissertation is a genealogical study of the intersections between popular
cinema, popular religion and politics in post-independence South India which produce,
what I call, the figure of the citizen-devotee. The dissertation argues that the overlaps
between citizens, devotees and film spectators over the decades need to be viewed not as
an non-modern or irrational aberration that demand an explanation but as an opportunity
to revise our understanding of citizenship and religiosity itself. Citizenship is not merely
a political subjectivity that ought to over-ride all other affiliations and identities but is an
embodied affective way of being that is shaped crucially by ideas of national belonging

and national history (and even regional and linguistic histories and identities) as well as by processes of governmentality and developments and discourses in the cinema and other media. In modern times, the religious mode of being too is by no means a private affair as liberal secularism decrees but is crucially mediated both by modern political formations like the nation, the state, the processes of governmentality as well as the mass media which make it visible in particular ways. Hence, I use the hyphenated term, the citizen-devotee to indicate the mutual imbrications of the two categories.

The primary focus of the dissertation is the discursive field of Telugu cinema in the period starting roughly from the 1950s to the 2000s. By the discursive field of cinema, I refer to not only filmic texts, but also disciplines of film making, practices of publicity, modes of film criticism as well as practices of viewership all of which are an inalienable part of the institution of cinema. However, in the latter part, the dissertation moves beyond the field of cinema to the larger field of popular culture which includes other media like print, television and radio. Through tracking the emergence of the figure of the citizen-devotee and the transformations, interruptions, reversals and challenges that have marked its career at different moments and in different media, the dissertation maps the terrain of contemporary politics in South India.

Cinema and Politics

The cinema-politics link in South India has been recognized for some time given the extraordinary phenomenon where in at least three states—Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka political leaders like M.G. Ramachandran, N.T. Rama Rao and Raj Kumar

respectively emerged from the field of cinema. This has been the subject of some very important studies (Elder and Schmitthenner 1985), (Pandian 2000), (Prasad 2004), (Prasad 2009), (Srinivas 2006), (Srinivas 2009). These studies have provided rich and complex accounts of the ways in which cinema is used as a means for propagating political ideologies and consolidating regional linguistic identities. They give detailed descriptions of the how star images are constructed. They have also studied the ways in which fan clubs become the basis for political mobilization and the overlaps between the identities of cinema fan and of political subject namely, the citizen. However, what remains poorly appreciated and unexplored in these cinema-politics studies is another important dimension, namely popular religion especially the crucial role it plays in the case of Telugu cinema and the Andhra Pradesh context. As mentioned earlier, this dissertation argues that an examination of this dimension will allow us to appreciate how popular religious and secular traditions are being constantly shaped and reshaped through different mass media especially cinema and the kinds of ethical and political subjects that such technologies and related discourses produce. Furthermore, this examination will have implications for any effort to rethink some of the most fundamental terms of our contemporary political vocabularies like *citizenship*, *representation* and *secularism*.

Citizenship and Devotion

What is the relation between citizenship and devotion? The term *deshbhakti* in many Indian languages, for example, gives us a sense of this modern demand for *bhakti* i.e devotion and willing submission towards the nation and by extension the state. Hence

earlier forms of bhakti towards a divine authority (*daiva bhakti)* or towards an earthly master or lord *(swami bhakti)*, or in the case of the woman devotion towards her husband *(pati bhakti*) are now to be subordinated to this new *deshbhakti* which is towards the nation. But as I try to demonstrate in the pages that follow, in our times, citizenship and the various forms of devotion do not and cannot exist as independent categories but necessarily contaminate each other. On the one hand, I use the term the citizen-devotee to indicate that the citizen ideal is always traversed by and shot through with other formations of subjectivity that inflect it in significant ways. On the other hand, it points to the incontrovertible fact that in modern liberal democracies, it is impossible to simply be a devotee (Hindu: *bhakta*) where one's allegiance is only to a particular religion or mode of being. On the contrary, willingly or unwillingly one is enmeshed in the discourse of rights and duties and is subjected to the governance of the state. One cannot wholly extricate oneself from the politics of identity and the logics of majority and minority and so on. Religion as we know it today is itself the product of an encounter with modern rationalities of power and the modern media. Hence, we cannot simply talk about the citizen or the devotee, but only of the modern hybrid formation, the citizen-devotee. The dissertation tracks the genealogies of this figure both on-screen and off-screen through examining changing practices of film making and viewing in South India.

This introduction is divided into three sections. The first section outlines the theoretical frameworks and conceptual debates that I draw upon to elaborate my argument. The second section provides a detailed introduction to the central object of my research—the mythological and devotional genres in Telugu cinema. It provides a history of the genres through tracing the various performative traditions as well as oral and printed texts that

have provided a basis for this cinema. At the same time by paying close attention to the formal and narrative aspects of these films, I argue that cinema's technology as well as the new political context mediates existing texts and traditions significantly. Therefore, these films are contemporary films, not simply carriers of ancient myths and beliefs. The third and final section describes briefly the overall method adopted in the study and the range of material that I have used. It also provides brief descriptions of the chapters that follow to show how each chapter seeks to extend and elaborate the central thesis of the dissertation through an exploration of different dimensions and instances of the religion, cinema and politics link.

I

The Crisis of Secularism in India

The early decades of post-independence India were dominated by (what in retrospect has been called) the "Nehruvian consensus" in which a planned economy, a secular polity and largely non-aligned foreign policy were key features. All these elements were to fall into a crisis starting from the 1970s. For the purpose of this dissertation, however, I focus on the issue of secularism. The independent Indian state declared itself to be a secular nation and the Indian citizen was granted various rights irrespective of caste, religion, region etc. and the freedom to practise his or her religion. Two parallel developments in the 1980s and 1990s precipitated the unravelling of this secular fabric of the Indian nation. The first foregrounded the question of religious identity and community. A cluster of events which can provide a short-hand description of this development are—the Shah Bano case and the debate over the Uniform Civil Code Bill; the rise of right-wing

Hindutva politics which mobilized the Hindu identity as an aggrieved majority that was the victim of the "pseudo-secularism" and "minority-appeasement" policies of the Congress years and; the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in 1992 and the communal violence that followed. The second cluster of events brought to the fore the question of caste. The introduction of the Mandal Bill in 1990 to provide reservations to OBCs (Other Backward Castes) in education and public employment; the anti-Mandal agitation; the rise of the backward castes to political power and the growth of a strong dalit movement. Both these developments proved that far from disappearing from the public sphere, both religious and caste identities played an important role in the struggles for power and hegemony in Indian society.

Two important lines of thinking emerged from the critical work that was produced in the wake of these developments. The first was an attempt to unpack the dominant secular ideology in India to reveal that the abstract citizen-subject, despite its disavowal of all particular identities, was invisibly marked as Hindu, male and upper caste. And that it was this subject which was rendered normative. [2] The second line of thinking was an attempt to interrogate the concept of secularism itself as it emerged in the Western context, to outline its limitations and impasses and to map its particular history in India (Bhargava 1998), (Needham and Sunder Rajan 2007), (Tejani 2007). Partha Chatterjee has recently extended this investigation to think about the tensions between "unbound serialities" like citizenship and the "bound serialities" like caste and religious identity (Chatterjee 2004). He also extends this investigation to probe the very dynamics between modernity and democracy in India.

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[2] See (Dhareshwar 1993), (Niranjana 2000), (Pandian 2002), (Dhareshwar and Srivatsan 1996), (Tharu 1998), (Tharu and Niranjana 1994), (Nigam 2006), (Menon 2006)

Citizenship and Politics in Heterogeneous Times

Chatterjee has theorized popular politics in what he calls "the heterogeneous time of modernity". Questioning some fundamental assumptions of classic social and political theory, he argues that the supposed "empty homogeneous time" of modern politics is merely the utopian time of capital. It is an ideal that sustains the teleological historicist imagination of identity, nationhood and progress. In the actual workings of modern life, according to Chatterjee, we find that "time is heterogeneous, unevenly dense." While modern political theory has endorsed identities such as citizens, workers, nations, intellectuals etc. as universal identities and therefore considers them liberating, it designates other identities based on ethnic or racial origin or religious community to be constricting and conflict-producing. Benedict Anderson's book *The Spectre of Comparison* is a good example of this faith in the universalist critical thought of the Enlightenment. Anderson names the former 'unbound serialities' and the latter 'bound serialities'. Chatterjee takes issue with this conception. He argues, "to endorse these 'unbound serialities' while rejecting the "bound" is, in fact, to imagine nationalism and democratic politics without modern governmentality. He argues:

> The politics of democratic nationhood offers a means for achieving a more substantive equality, but only by ensuring adequate representation for the underprivileged groups within the body politic. A strategic politics of groups, classes, communities, ethnicities—bound serialities of all sorts—is thus inevitable. Homogeneity is not thereby forsaken.....On the other hand, unlike the utopian claims of universalist nationalism, the politics of heterogeneity can never claim to yield a general formula for all peoples at all times: its solutions are always, strategic, contextual, historically specific and, inevitably, provisional (Chatterjee 2004, 22).

Chatterjee proceeds to argue further that this is the inevitable way in which democratic politics unfolds in a country like India. Most often there is a conflict between the demands of modernity and the demands of democracy. Hence, we find such phenomenon as religious assemblies, cultural festivals and even film fan clubs becoming the grounds of political mobilization. As he describes it:

> what we see is the importation of the disorderly, corrupt, and irrational practices of unreformed popular culture into the very hallways and chambers of civic life, all because of the calculations of electoral expediency. The noble pursuit of modernity appears to have been seriously compromised because of the compulsions of parliamentary democracy (Chatterjee 2004).

Critics of such developments invariably condemn these practices as compromising the noble ideals of modernity and secularism but Chatterjee is of the opinion that we ought to attend to such practices with seriousness as they tell us something about the way in which popular sovereignty struggles against the normalizing practices of governmentality to create real ethical spaces where the terms of justice maybe reworked.

I think that it is possible to perceive the new kinds of politics and citizenship that are forged in the heterogeneous times of Indian democracy in the intersections between popular cinema, religion and politics that I will be exploring through this dissertation.

More on the Idea of the Citizen-Devotee

The last two sections have demonstrated that the unbound seriality of the citizen is always being contaminated by bound identities like those of caste, gender and religious community. Recent work in political and anthropological theory too has sought to rework

the Kantian lineages of the citizen as a free, individual, reasoning sovereign agent.[3] This work has attempted to show that people act as political subjects not merely as reasoning agents but also as embodied and affective beings who are shaped by particular histories and contexts. As the political theorist, Chantal Mouffe has argued that the problem with many theories of democracy today, including the deliberative model of democracy, is that it presumes a certain kind of democratic subject who is imagined to be either a bearer of natural rights or a rational subject or a utility-maximizing agent. This subject is believed to be free of history, language, culture and religion, all conditions which crucially shape the kind of democratic subject that emerges in particular contexts.[4]

Commenting on the importance of cultivating certain attributes in the historical formation of the citizen figure, David Burchell has argued that contemporary debates about citizenship have tended to bypass:

> the idea of the citizen as a social creation, as a historical persona whose characteristics have been developed in particular times and places and through the activities of social disciplines, both externally on the part of government and 'internally' by techniques of self-discipline and self-formation. It is this kind of terrain which Michel Foucault was gesturing when he connected his political studies of early modern governmentality with his accounts of practices of self-formation and self-discipline derived from classical Stoic and Christian ethical doctrines (Burchell 1995).

The cultural politics of cinema give us a glimpse into the terrain of struggle between governmental disciplines, the ambiguous effects of mediatization and the counter-practices of different individuals and groups. The Indian citizen is then the creation of different discourses—some complementary but others which are conflicting. Therefore,

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[3] For an illuminating discussion of this idea see (Balibar 1991) and (Balibar 1988)

[4] Chantal Mouffe in *The Democratic Paradox.* Cited in (Laclau 2005)

despite its enmeshment in governmental practices the subject of religion and cinema remains a citizen but a citizen of a particular kind, the citizen-devotee. This dissertation tries to reveal the particular media and discourse networks that engender it and make it visible. An important part of the effort is also to trace the class, caste and gendered contours of this figure as it is articulated in different instances.

Anthropologies of Religion and Media

Talal Asad's very important reflections on the modern categories of religion and secularism are some of the most insightful to emerge over the last decade. Asad begins by asserting that "there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes" (Asad 1993). He argues further that the modern concept of religion has emerged out of "a modern restructuration of practical times and spaces, a rearticulation of practical knowledges and powers, of subjective behaviors, sensibilities, needs and expectations in modernity" (Asad 2001). In short, it has emerged alongside the doctrine of secularism. In his more recent work therefore, he calls for a simultaneous consideration and understanding of the concepts of the religious and the secular.

A number of other studies produced in anthropology over the last two decades have tried to understand the relation between religion and the media. They have especially engaged with issues of sensory perception and the embodied corporeal nature of engagement with modern forms of media, be it calendar art or photography in India ((Jain 2002), (Jain

2003), (Pinney 2004); the different technologies of audio-visual media in the Western world ((Buck-Morss 1994), (Seremetakis 1994); media technologies in Nigeria ((Larkin 2008) or cassette sermons in Egypt ((Hirschkind 2006). These works provide important conceptual tools with which we can approach the overlap between the spectator and devotee.

In a recent issue of the journal, *Social Text*, Larkin and Hirschkind have put together an important and interesting collection of new work on the media and the political forms of religion (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008). In their introduction they make a very significant observation: "the availability of new media, with their particular forms of circulation and use, impinges on practices of religious mediation, knowledge, pedagogy, and discipline, and thereby shapes the making of religious subjects" (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008, 5) They point to two lines of inquiry that the volume's contributors pursue. The first of these is concerned with the ways in which new forms of media are put to use in the preservation and dissemination of tradition and in the individual cultivation of religious sensibilities. In the films that I examine, and the practices of film making, publicity and consumption that are associated with these genres, there are certainly practices that one might describe as having a major role in shaping and conditioning the sensory experience of people. Some of the new audio-visual technologies have also been used by people in the individual cultivation of piety or in establishing a community.

However, the public nature of the film viewer's engagement with cinema in theatres has been a matter of greater discussion and concern for the secular elite. There are well-known instances of the viewers of mythological and devotional films either praying to gods on screen, singing along and swaying during songs or even being possessed by the

power of the deity on screen. Many of the embodied responses to these films would affirm what Christopher Pinney has called "corpothetics": the ways aesthetic forms demand a full corporeal engagement from the viewer and listener, acting on the body itself to produce intense affective states (Pinney 2004). Indeed, it would be necessary to get a fuller and better understanding of the embodied aesthetic responses that film viewers have cultivated in other contexts and now bring to the reception of the cinema screen. In this respect, Asad's reflections on the notion of *habitus* provide us with a very useful framework.

Thinking about Agency and *Habitus*

In Asad's view this understanding of *habitus* and its relation to human actions opens up the possibility "of enquiring into the ways in which embodied practices (including languages-in-use) form a precondition for varieties of religious (and secular) experience." He argues further that "authority itself comes to be understood not as an ideologically justified coercion but as a predisposition of the embodied self" (Asad 2003, 252).

In a fine explication of Asad's work on the relation between *habitus* and agency, Scott comments that for Asad agency cannot be thought of outside of *habitus* (Scott 2006). It is the space of sedimented and embodied practices and cultivation of particular sensory abilities. *Habitus* is "an embodied capacity that is more than physical ability in that it also includes cultivated sensibilities and passions, an orchestration of the senses." Asad clarifies further in an interview, "I employ *habitus* to refer to the predisposition of the body, to its traditional sensibilities. There's a crucial difference between *habit* as the

disposition the body acquires through repetition and inertia, through the generally unconscious and uncontrollable circuits of energy, emotion, feeling, and *habitus*, that aspect of a tradition in which specific virtues are defined and the attempt to cultivate and enact them (D. Scott 2006, 289)."

The work of scholars like Asad and Scott alerts us to the problematic assumptions that govern secular modern conceptions of agency as disembodied reflexive reason. They also thereby challenge a particular conception of what constitutes the properly "political" derived from liberal notions of the individual. Asad's notion of *habitus* is a productive opening for thinking of viewer responses to cinema. What kinds of embodied modes of apprehension do spectators bring to the mythological or devotional cinema? What problems does this involved/corporeal mode pose for the liberal conception of rational spectator?

New Publics and New modes of Circulation

At the same time, I think it is important to remember that these affective responses are understood and rendered intelligible or problematic by different discourses that circulate in and around films. These include film criticism, film publicity and film censorship to name just a few of the more institutionalized discourses. The printed calendars examined by Pinney and Jain, and the sermon cassettes examined by Hirschkind are both cheaply produced goods and due to their specific nature are amenable to individual private use and circulation. Unlike these, film production is an altogether more expensive proposition and is primarily meant for public and collective viewing. Despite recent private modes of

circulation of film, it remains a capital-intensive commodity that is produced by an industry that needs to identify a logic, a structure and elements within it that can be named, branded and reproduced every time in order to make it saleable and successful.

Therefore, our attention to *habitus* and embodiment needs to be tempered by attention to the new forms of virtual and anonymous publics created by the new audio-visual forms. Hence, there is a second line of enquiry that Larkin and Hirschkind identify in their study of media and religion which examines the circulatory modes through which religious publics are constituted. They state that "these modes of circulation are less about the complex cultivation of pious sensibilities—the fashioning of individual religious subjectivities—and more about the constitution of religious identity within the broader public arenas (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008, 5)." They also emphasize that this move from a focus on "religious subjectivity" to "public" is not be read as a move from "religion" to "politics". They clarify:

> Rather our focus on circulatory modes, public forms, and relational identities aims to flesh out some of the conditions that shape the possibilities of religious subjectivity and action but that don't take the form of the exercises of self-cultivation...These conditions are political, but no more so than those we identified as pertaining to the fashioning and organization of sensory experiences (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008, 6).

Following these suggestive remarks, I seek to explore the ways in which cinema and other media create mass religious identities that are yoked together with other social and political identities to produce particular kinds of subjects.

Apart from Pinney and Jain's work which I have already mentioned, in the Indian context, there have been some important studies that explore the relations between

religion and media. The important collection edited by Babb and Wadley was an early pioneering effort (Babb and Wadley 1997). The work of Rajagopal and Mankekar provided complex accounts of television viewing in India and the particular kinds of identities it produced (Mankekar 1999), (Rajagopal 2001). However, there has not been any major work that seriously engages with popular cinema and religion. Rachel Dwyer's recent work is an exception but it largely confines itself to Hindi cinema (Dwyer 2006). Therefore, this dissertation is the first full-length study of the mythological and devotional genres in Telugu cinema and their relation to religion and politics.

II

Existing Frameworks for understanding mythological cinema

Silent cinema began in India in 1913 and the talkies came in 1931. The first four decades of filmmaking in India witnessed the production of innumerable Hindu mythological and devotional films. The mythological films, called *pauranik* in Hindi and *pauranikam* in Telugu, were films that drew upon the stories in the two grand epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and other Puranic literature. The devotional films (referred to as *bhakti chitralu* in Telugu) were mostly biographies of Hindu saints or exemplary devotees. Often they could be biographies of particular deities or regional shrines and they usually focused on recounting the miraculous powers of the deity and the glory of the shrine. In contrast, the social film (a genre which dealt with contemporary themes revolving around ordinary human beings in a broadly realist or melodramatic

form) struggled to establish itself. However, from the 1950s onwards, it emerged as the dominant genre in Hindi cinema.

As mentioned earlier, from the earliest years of cinema making in India there has been an uneasy and ambiguous relationship between the ideal of progressive and socially realistic films desired by the intelligentsia and the mass popularity that mythological and devotional films enjoyed. There were repeated calls by intelligent filmmakers and critics for the making of films that deal with "real people" and their problems, in short with "social issues". This call to portray people rather than gods and other supernatural beings as agential subjects was part of the larger project of the nationalist secularization of the public sphere in which a rational and scientific outlook had to be established. Religion ought to be confined to the private sphere but could be reformed and governed by the state in the interests of creating a modern nation. Furthermore many nationalist critics believed that the films were indeed undermining the great spiritual tradition of India through their improper focus on the Puranic stories which were considered not worthy enough to be part of a modern and reformed Hinduism.[5]

Early Indian film history is therefore, usually narrativized as a progressive history of the rise of the secular, realist social genre with its focus on ordinary people mostly figured as the citizens and subjects of modern and free India, as opposed to the preoccupation with myths, saints and religiosity in the early genres. This dissertation challenges this "secularization thesis" which implicitly structures this account by arguing that—Firstly religiosity does not disappear with the social film. It is only differently configured to suit

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[5] For an interesting account of how the Puranas were produced as superstition and myth and therefore as the Other of Vedic Hinduism by nationalist-reformist bodies like the Arya Samaj, see (Prakash 2003)

a secular frame. Secondly, an exclusive focus on the history of Hindi (lately termed "Bollywood") cinema or the internationally better known art cinema of India blurs the very different trajectory that cinema in the languages of South India followed. South Indian film history shows that the mythological and folklore films were extremely popular genres in Telugu and in Tamil (to a lesser extent) at least until the late 1970s and that successful devotional films continue to be made even today.[6] Indeed in the 2008 diamond jubilee celebrations of the Telugu film industry, the mythological film, although a dead genre now was proclaimed to be the most unique contribution that Telugu cinema has made to Indian cinema. But before I proceed to a focussed discussion of Telugu cinema, I will consider the dominant frameworks that have been used to study the mythological cinema.

Although not considered worthy of scholarly focus earlier, from the 1980s Indian popular cinema began to attract a wide range of scholars. Social and political theorists, psychologists, anthropologists and scholars of religion and film makers and critics too began advocating new perspectives and approaches to the study of popular Indian cinema.[7] There emerged three dominant approaches to understanding the mythological cinema and more broadly to the relationship between myth and cinema. One approach

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[6] As we will see later in this dissertation even the broad classification of socials, mythologicals and devotionals has varied over time and across the varied linguistic cinematic traditions in India. What is identified as the mythological in Hindi might be considered a devotional in Telugu. Further each of these had spawned different sub-genres like the *sant* saint film of the 1940s in Marathi and Hindi, the socio-fantasy film since the late 1970s in Telugu and the *amman* (goddess) film from the 1980s onwards in Telugu and Tamil. The folklore film, popular in both Telugu and Tamil in the decades of the 1950s to the 1970s is another minor genre which combines elements of the devotional film with those of stunt films. Furthermore, the small number of historical films that were also costume dramas, often 'looked and sounded' a lot like the folklore films which featured the adventures of princes and kings.

[7] The special issue of the journal, India International Centre Quarterly on "Indian Popular Cinema: Myth, Meaning and Metaphor" (8:1, March 1980) is a representative collection. It has essays by Wendy Doniger, Ashish Nandy, Veena Das and Sudhir Kakar among others.

was what we can broadly call the secular-elitist approach that was worried about the

persistence of mythical narrative in modern cinema. Therefore, B.V. Dharap writing in

1983 says:

> So long as the mental make-up of Indians continues to be spiritual rather than materialistic; so long as ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, superstition rule the large mass of people in this country; so long as fatalism is taken for granted, such pictures will always have an audience and the sway of mythological movies will continue (Dharap 1983, 83).

As is evident from the above statement, there is an ambiguity, even collapsing of

spirituality and superstition. Dharap is not quite sure if it is the religiosity of the masses

or their superstitious beliefs that leads them to patronize these films. Arguing along

similar lines, Das Gupta (whom I cited at the beginning of this introduction) concludes

that it is the incomplete transition of the Indian masses to rationality and modernity that

accounts for the popularity of the mythological films. For both Dharap and Das Gupta

then the central problem lay with the credulity of the audience and their incomplete

modernization.

A second approach was that of religious studies which sought to demonstrate the

enduring nature of myth and religiosity in the Indian context. Wendy Doniger's essay is

representative in this regard (Doniger 1980). Through her analysis of "a randomly

selected" successful Hindi film, *Karz* (1980), Doniger demonstrates that ancient Hindu

myths have found a new medium in cinema and that even genres that are not explicitly

"mythological" are deeply structured by mythical elements.[8] In this approach there is

little attention paid to the contemporary uses of myth and to the discourse of nationalism

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[8] (Derne 1995) too adopts a similar theoretical approach.

or modernity that it is part of. Neither is the history of Indian cinematic genres believed to be relevant enough to be considered. There is even less of an attempt to interrogate the concept of religion and myth itself and the work that these concepts perform in the discourse around mythological cinema.

The unexpected success of a low budget mythological film, *Jai Sanotshi Ma* (1976) prompted anthropologist, Veena Das to uncover the ways in which the Santoshi Ma film selectively appropriates and reshapes the existing myths of the goddess (Das 1980). The essay undoubtedly adopts a more nuanced approach than the religious studies and anthropological readings being offered until then. Das also gestures towards an understanding of the film that reflects upon the contemporary conditions of possibility for the film. She says "it seems to me that the cult of Santoshi Ma is by its nature likely to find major acceptance in urban areas, where the 'demons' are shapeless and ubiquitous, and where the knowledge of traditional cults has declined (Das 1980, 54)." In other words, she considers it is a myth for modern times. Her essay also attempts to understand the dynamics of gender as they operate in the film.

The 1990s saw the publication of three sophisticated essays that explored the relationship between the mythological genre and Indian nationalism and more broadly Indian modernity. Eschewing both the secular criticism and the anthropological/religious studies approach, they addressed the films as cultural forms and therefore examined them in formal aesthetic terms even as they engaged with the debates taking place in contemporary Indian historiography. These were essays by film scholar, Ashish

Rajadhyaksha (Rajadhyaksha 1993) and art historians, Geeta Kapur (G. Kapur 2000) and Anuradha Kapur (A. Kapur 1995). Interestingly enough, they preferred to use the term, "tradition" over the term, "religion" to refer to the domain that the mythological films gesture towards and draw meaning from. Their attempt was to outline the "politics" of the cultural form rather than uncover an already existing religiosity howsoever defined.

The essays by the Kapurs are of special interest to me as they open up the question of the "modern" and of "religion" in interesting ways. Geeta Kapur offers a comparative analysis of two films—the first an extremely popular 1936 mythological, *Sant Tukaram* and the second, a critically acclaimed realist film made by Satyajit Ray titled *Devi* (1960). She says that her essay "deals with the successive inscription of revelation and doubt, faith and dissent. I make, first, an investigation of the affirmative idiom of *Sant Tukaram*, seeing its iconography and devotional narrative transmuted into a contemporary rendition of the tradition. I then place it face-to-face with the realist interrogation in *Devi* where Ray patiently unmasks a pathetic illusion of the holy. I deal deliberately with discrete modes to see how in the transitional decades of national self-definition alternating strategies are used to recoup and critique traditions; how contemporary cultural practice evolves in effect by compounding these alternatives to form the *modern*". I find Geeta Kapur's elaboration of the mythic and secular/realist modes as strategies to engage with tradition and her conception of the modern as being formed through these engagements extremely useful and interesting. I use it as a starting point for my own enquiry into Telugu cinema. However, I feel that in popular cinema, these strategies are perhaps not alternatives that one can deliberately choose. Moreover a

closer examination of popular cinema reveals that despite genre distinctions, it is not easy to neatly demarcate and divide films or their aesthetics as being devotional or secular; mythical or realist.

Anuradha Kapur approaches the problem from a different angle. She examines the theatrical conventions of the Parsi theatre and the ways in which they presented the new nationalist Hindu mythologicals that were being written during the late 19th and early 20th century. In these plays, Kapur argues, the conventions of realism chafe against the conventions of ideal portraiture that inform the traditional relationship between devotee and deity. She argues that the Parsi mythological plays appear at the intersection of ideal portraiture and bourgeois drama and attempt to partake of both sorts of desires: "the desire caused by wonder and the desire caused by identification". Realist narrative secularizes the mythical events by introducing questions of motive and causality and thereby the gods are domesticated as someone we might know and identify with. She proceeds to argue that this in turn necessitates the introduction of miracle and spectacle to convince the audience of the reality of the gods. "Spectacle/miracle marks the entry of European realism on the Indian stage. At that moment a new set of relationships between devotee and deity is also opened out, as also different modes of worship, idealization and desire (A. Kapur 1995)." This essay provides an excellent entry point to the ways in which modernity and new technologies and art forms refigure existing religiosity. In the following sections, I provide a detailed account of the specific background of the Telugu tradition of mythological and devotional cinema.

Telugu Mythological Cinema and its Antecedents: The *Puranic* literary tradition

In his work on Telugu literature and culture, Narayana Rao makes two important points. He observes: "Massive retellings of *purana* texts, among which the Mahabharata was the first, were undertaken (in Telugu) by a host of Brahmin poets between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, an activity that has gone on virtually unabated right into the twentieth century (Narayana Rao 1995)." The Puranas were not just translated they were performed in temples and other religious establishments for public hearing, thus bringing the retold Telugu texts closer to the audience for whom they were intended. The second important point is that these were not mere translations but retellings that involved narrative transformations of various kinds. Narayana Rao argues, "what Nannayya or Tikkana (medieval Telugu poets) did in retelling the Mahabharata in Telugu was to create a domestic Mahabharata, transformed to a regional story of medieval South India, that could happen in any South Indian kingdom, or for that matter in any large joint family (Narayana Rao 1995, 26-7)."

Twentieth century modern literature in Telugu too displays varied critical engagements with the mythical traditions, especially the Ramayana. Celebrating them, or modernizing and contemporizing them, sometimes critiquing and subverting them—there is a wide spectrum of engagements. Narayana Rao identifies a strong "anti-Ramayana discourse" that developed critiques of the epic from various perspectives like the modernist, Marxist and feminist.[9] As recently as 2000, *Apoorva Puranagadhalu*, a collection of "forgotten"

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[9] (Narayana Rao 2000). Narayana Rao identifies Viswanadha Satyanaryana (b.1895), the author of the *Ramayana Kalpavruksham*, as probably the only writer of the 20th century who celebrates the epic. Writings of the anti-Ramayana discourse include Tripuraneni Ramaswami Chaudari's *Shambuka Vadha* (1920) and *Suta Puranamu* (1925); Gudipati Venkata Chalam's *Seeta Agnipravesam* (1935) and Mupalla Ranganayakamma's *Ramayana Vishavruksham* (1970s) to name the most prominent.

stories that have been retrieved to provide a feminist and Dalit perspective on the classical Telugu and Hindu mythology was published (Sauda 2000).

Elsewhere, Rao has pointed out that 'minor' subversive folk traditions of retelling Ramayana too exist (Narayana Rao 1991). For example, his work on the women's Ramayana sung in parts of Andhra Pradesh presents a radically different perspective than the one that informs the familiar Rama story. Here the woman's point of view is presented prominently. Sita's experience of growing up, her experiences of pregnancy and labour are recounted in great detail. Commenting in general on the nature of folk Puranas, the well-known folklorist and translator, A.K. Ramanujan remarks "In taking the same gods and heroes as in the Sanskritic Epics and Puranas and making them do, say, and mean different things in a local milieu, the folk myths *domesticate* them, *incorporate* them in bodies that sweat, stink, defecate and menstruate (which their Puranic counterparts usually don't, with a few notable exceptions like Parvati making Ganesa out of her body dirt), *localize* them, and often *contemporize* them (Ramanujan 1993, 105)." The folk Puranas in Telugu too conform to a large extent to the characterization that Ramanujan provides. Thangavelu's important work on lower caste Puranas of the Telangana region is an excellent example (Thangavelu 1998).

The Puranic Traditions: From the Stage to the Screen

Even more popular than the literary tradition of engaging with the epics and Puranic material was the strong tradition of staging mythological plays. The stage was an extremely popular medium of entertainment in Telugu and the period between the late

19th to early 20th century saw the production of many successful stage plays. These continued to be staged well into the sixties and later too. Many of these were to provide the "content" for early films. Stories, dialogues, songs, actors, costume and set designs, and even narrative conventions were all borrowed from this rich repertoire. In fact many of the early films in Telugu are considered by critics to be no more than recorded plays. Most popular among the mythological plays (written mostly in the period between 1890 and 1930) which travelled to cinema in whole or parts were *Pandava Udyoga Vijayalu*; *Satya Harischandra* ; *Gayopakhayanam*; *Sati Savitri*; *Sri Krishna Tulabharam* and; *Prahlada*. All of these plays were famous for their songs and sung verses, the *padyalu*. The ability to deliver long monologues consisting of poly-syllabic words and alliterative phrases was a skill that was highly appreciated. Further the ability to sing the dramatic verses (*padyalu*) with the right pitch, intonation and pause, all which were necessary to convey the right sense and meaning of the verse, was considered indispensable. The ability to sustain the tune at the end of each verse was also an extremely important attribute of the talented *padyam* singer of the Telugu stage.

These traditions of weighty dramatic monologues and *padyam* singing were carried over into the cinematic tradition as well and became one of the chief distinguishing features of the Telugu mythological film. Many films based on the stage plays introduced visual innovations but more or less retained the aural world of the stage play. Therefore, most viewers of the mythological cinema came to the theatre with ears that were attuned to the monologues and *padyam* singing traditions. The films revived and refreshed their aural memories of the plays.

The Stage Actor and Screen Actor

Although the live actor who could be persuaded to do an encore was now replaced by the image on screen, the actor on screen came with a different kind of distance and proximity than the stage actor. The stage actor had a material presence which could be apprehended by all the senses, at least theoretically. But given the material conditions of stage performance, stages constructed in the open air or in public halls, only a few people would be able to be at close quarters from where the sweat on the actor's face would be visible and the actor's breathing would be audible. For most others seated or standing at a distance from the stage, the actor was a moving body whose gesture, postures and expressions had to be greatly pronounced in order to be communicated. The voice too had to be bold and loud and projected far to reach all ears present. The screen actor's presence was of a different kind—it was an absent presence enabled by technology. Paradoxical as it may seem, by not being physically, he or she was more closely and more clearly visible and audible. Not only his entire body but his face, hands and feet could now be seen magnified in close-ups and mid-shots. Therefore, only a few of the popular stage actors were able to make a successful transition to the screen. The screen demanded faces that were photogenic—beautiful, pleasing and youthful even as new audio technologies of playback recording rendered singing skills irrelevant. Hence, the actor's voice too acquired a different grain. Cinema experimented with singing actors through the thirties and forties. But in the forties playback singing was developed as a technique and despite many debates about its desirability established itself firmly by the early fifties.[10] *Padyams* as well as songs were now being rendered by professional playback singers. The screen

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[10] Kiranmayi Indraganti's unpublished doctoral work on playback singing presents an interesting account of the debates around this issue.

actor did not need to be a singer too. The actor only had to "look" his part and "enact" the singing that is, provide the accurate lip-movement in sync with the recorded sound being replayed. Further, the practice of all-night stage plays where a principal character was played by two or three different actors was now reversed by cinema where the same actor needed to play the same role through the film and indeed could technically play more than one role at the same time. Cinema's potential for enabling actors to play double and triple roles was, of course, not adequately explored until the sixties and the seventies. And as we will see in Chapter 1, Telugu cinema's most successful mythological actor NTR was to deploy this possibility most effectively.

New Listening and Viewing Subjects

From the late 19th century a new social and cultural landscape was taking shape in which a new listening culture and new listening subjects were being forged. Even before the cinema had learned to speak in the 1930s, new modes of listening were being cultivated by the arrival of audio technologies like the gramophone records and the radio. From the late 1800s onwards gramophones gained wide listenership and South India witnessed a 'music boom' in the 1920s and 30s (Hughes 2002). While classical Carnatic music gained new audiences and new patrons with this boom, dramatic monologues and *padyalu* from plays too became available as records and attracted many listeners. Later all through the decades of the fifties to the eighties, radio was an extremely popular medium.[11] Many popular stage plays, both mythological and social, were adapted and re-

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[11] It created listening subjects who listened with enthusiasm to film songs and folk songs, classical and devotional music; to the news as well as programmes which dealt with themes ranging from health to

presented as radio plays. In the seventies, the Vijayawada All India Radio station was a highly popular cultural node in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It was the centre for Telugu publishing and many other cultural activities. When B. Rajanikanta Rao took over as the Vijayawada radio station director, he introduced a number of innovative programmes. *Rangasthali* (The Stage) was one such programme which featured performances by well-known stage artists. They sang popular *padyalu* and re-enacted famous scenes from stage plays. Other traditional forms of aural discourses on the Puranas which radio reinvigorated, reinvented and made available to a large listening public was the *Harikatha* and *Purana Kalakshepam.* These were performance traditions wherein the singer-performer would sing and expound on the particular Puranic text or story. These were at once religious practices *and* forms of entertainment.

Two hugely popular Telugu radio programmes of this nature broadcast in the seventies were *Vyasa Peetham* and *Dharma Sandehalu* conducted by Usha Sri in which he narrated and commented upon the epic stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata.[12] Every Sunday afternoon, Usha Sri would narrate episodes from the epics, explain the nature and motives of characters and dwell at length on the subtleties of the *dharma* (ethics) involved. Listeners would write to him with their queries in relation to the epics, "Why did such and such character act in the ways he or she did? What is the story behind such and such a practice in the epics?" He would answer them all with wit and authority and the entire

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education; religious and philosophical discourses to information on the climate and agriculture. Listeners were addressed as students, women, farmers, devotees, consumers of culture and so on. The cultural history of radio in Telugu is a fascinating area awaiting research.

[12] Gayatri Spivak recalls listening to the radio discourses on the *Devi Mahatmya* by Birendrakrishna Bhadra in the 1950s. See (Spivak 2001). Radio's role in popularizing religious texts and shaping religious traditions in different languages of India remains to be explored further.

state is supposed to have listened with rapt attention. It was popularly believed that many

people in the rural areas would light lamps in front of the radio and listen to his discourse

with devotion.[13] I will be discussing issues of religiosity and the audiences of

technological media in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. For the purposes of this

introduction, I simply want to note the cultural context within which mythological cinema

was received. I also want to mark the ways in which audio-visual technologies created

new listening and viewing publics as well as the cultivation of particular senses they

engendered. In the following section I return once again to the discussion of the Telugu

mythological film.

The Contemporary Nature of the Mythological Film

Following these well-established traditions of interpolations and modifications, many

filmic versions of the Puranic and folk tales, too invented and inserted new episodes into

old narratives, shifted narrative perspective to suit contemporary views, and revised and

interpreted anew stories and characters. For instance, the film director, P. Pullaiah made

two successful films on the famous god of Tirupati both called *Sri Venkateswara

Mahatyam* first in 1936 and again in 1960. Pullaiah invented a new episode in the myths

about this god—a quarrel between his two wives which forces him to turn into stone and

become the idol which is now supposed to be at the Tirupati shrine. The writer of the

1936 film, Duvvuri Rami Reddi had not heard of this episode before but Pullaiah

convinced him that it was found in a purana written by a *Sudra kavi*, a Sudra Poet. Rami

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[13] Usha Sri was Puranapanda Suryaprakash Dikshitulu who took on the name Usha Sri for his radio programmes. Many of his radio discourses were later published in book form too. For more details see (Srikanta Sarma 2009) pp. 123-126

Reddi believed him and incorporated the scene into the film as it was not unusual for new episodes or different narratives to be found in different versions of the same myth. However, Pullaiah later confessed to him that the sudra kavi was none other than himself (Lakshmipati 1995). As far as we know, this revelation did not create any scandal nor did it affect the popularity of the film in any significant way. Neither was this seen as blasphemous. It is perhaps only within the Hindu nationalist politics of the kind that the Sangh Parivar endorses would this be seen as scandalous or blasphemous!

The narratives in many devotional and mythological films introduced contemporary themes of social and religious reform—therefore questions of female oppression, untouchability and caste oppression, or the practice of animal sacrifice in temples are all engaged with in different ways. Some make brief passing references or comments; others make them part of elaborate sub-plots that sometimes undermine and even parody the central narrative. Thus, for example, in *Sati Anasuya* (1957) the trinity of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma descend to earth and wander around as balladeers singing a song that criticizes practices of untouchability and caste discrimination while proffering a message of equality. The song ends and the film returns to the familiar episodes of the Anasuya myth. This film is the story of the great *pativrata*, Anasuya who is able to command even the gods and elements through the divine powers that she has acquired through her unrelenting and uncompromising practice of the ideals of wifehood. However, interestingly enough, the comic relief in the film is provided by the sub-plot of a shrewish wife and her oppressed husband. Here the ideals of wifehood are reversed and it is the wife who compels her husband to do all the housework and also to attend to all her needs and comforts. In another devotional film of the time, *Kalahasti Mahatyam* (1956) the

central narrative of a tribal man's conversion to *shiva bhakti*, is supplemented by a sub-plot about a corrupt priest who is besotted by the temple devadasi and who keeps his young wife under control by brainwashing her with the ideal of a good wife—the *pativrata dharma*. The tyrannical hold that he has over his wife is rendered terrifying and comical by turns.

Clearly, the need for producing a film that is two and a half to three hours long with adequate number of songs and verses made many demands on the filmmakers. Hence, myths that were short and episodic had to be fleshed out with character, motivation and justification for actions; they also had to be set concretely in time and place whether specific or mythical. Sets had to be designed to provide adequate spectacle and special effects had to be created to attract and hold audience attention when dealing with familiar stories whose plot lines contained no elements of surprise or suspense. All this meant that these films were not simply transpositions onto screen of already existing stories. They were also not merely translations or retellings but rather the medium of film transformed them in significant ways into spectacle, into visual record and into documentations of myth. Therefore the films were very much contemporary renditions.

Formal and Narrative Aspects of the Mythological and Devotional Cinema

In this cinema, we do not find a completely different set of formal and narrative conventions than those deployed by the social films. Rather a more or less similar combination of modes of representation and cinematic codes is present. This is to say that the social film is not more realistic simply by virtue of being set in modern, secular space;

neither is the mythological film less realistic for dealing with mythical characters and situations. Indeed, as Ashish Rajadhyaksha has remarked in relation to the early mythologicals of Phalke and other silent films of the 1920s, what we find in these is a cinematic realism: "not realism as plausibility but in its different guise, of *realization*: making it happen before your eyes (Rajadhyaksha 1994, 37)." He proceeds to quote from Phalke who stated: "Mountains, rivers, oceans, houses, human beings, animals, birds, everything on the screen is real. The miracle of the visual appearance of objects is sometimes caused by the play of light and shadow. This is the magic of the filmmaker."[14] Rajadhyaksha argues further that for Phalke they were also real because they could specifically be 'recognized' as Indian! Therefore, even though the early non-Phalke films that Rajadhyaksha examines could be divided following conventional genre classifications as the 'reform social', the 'Pauranic mythological' and the 'fantasy film'. What holds them together, according to him is an understanding of realism, as something that can be realized on screen and as something that is recognizable as nationalist Indian. "What brings them together, and allows for consistent overlaps that two decades after sound came to be ideologically inflected into the nationalist 'All-India film', is precisely the version of realism that Phalke argues for when he says that 'everything on the screen is real'. I might add, it is real because you can see it and, further, recognize it (Rajadhyaksha 1994, 37)." The cinematic codes most often deployed by these films were iconic framings of God, woman, landlord etc. and frontal tableaus picturing the God facing his devotees *Shri Krishna Janma* or the family with the woman at the centre of it in *Pitru Prem*.

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[14] Dadasaheb Phalke, essays on the Indian cinema, 'Bhartiya Chitrapat' in *Navyug*, Bombay: Nov. 1917 cited in (Rajadhyaksha 1994) p.37

These cinematic codes continue to be part of the cinematic language as it developed in India well into the 1950s. As film theorist, Ravi Vasudevan has noted that 1950s Hindi social films combine different modes of representation in an unsystematic fashion.

> Within these films, and much more widely in the cinema of that time, a number of modes of staging and narrating story events are in evidence. There is the iconic framing, an organization of the image in which stable meaning is achieved, whether of an archaic or contemporary nature....Another arrangement is that of the tableau which unlike the icon, presumes an underlying narrative structure: '...characters' attitudes and gestures, compositionally arranged for a moment, give, like an illustrative painting, a visual summary of the emotional situation.... Both the iconic and tableau modes are often presented frontally, at a 180 degree plane to the camera and seem to verge on statis, enclosing meaning within their frame, and ignoring the off-screen as a site of reference, potential disturbance and re-organization (Vasudevan 2000, 105-6).

However, as Vasudevan proceeds to argue the iconic and tableau modes can and do exist comfortably with codes of American continuity cinema like the "eyeline match, point-of-view shot, correct screen direction, match-on-action cuts" and so on.

Hence, I will be trying to identify not so much the differences in formal or narrative codes between the social and mythological/devotional genres but to historicize the deployment and appropriation of various formal techniques to produce and authorize certain forms of subjectivity. In other words, what I will be attempting is a historicizing of the cinematic tradition of engaging with mythic material.

III

This dissertation combines a historical account of Telugu cinema with an anthropology of film making and viewership practices. It examine a wide variety of sources—Telugu film

texts along with Telugu and English film journals, media reports, memoirs and biographies of actors and film makers as well as select interviews with film makers and film viewers which I conducted in Telugu. It draws on film and media theory to foreground the specificity of these technologies and the new kind of publics they create. Anthropological theories of religion, secularism and the formation of embodied and affective subjects are combined with political theories of citizenship and governmentality to complicate our understanding of the overlapping formations of film spectators, citizens and devotees.

A Short Description of the Chapters

Part I of the dissertation titled "History and Politics of Telugu Mythological and Devotional Films" consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 examines the case of NTR closely. It argues that if our critical objective is neither to demonstrate a tight fit between the popularity of NTR mythologicals and his political success nor to dispute such an explanation by pointing to a host of "properly" social and political factors, then we might be able to arrive at a different account that is not riven by liberal-secular anxieties about the spill-overs or "contaminations" between the fields of politics, popular entertainment and religion proper. This chapter focuses on the film and political career of NTR to discuss the ways in which the mythological film was central to the emergence of the male star into the position of a populist leader, one who appears capable of representing the interests of the Telugu people. Through the mythological and the socio-fantasy genres NTR emerges both as the embodiment of Telugu heritage as well as the pre-eminent

modern citizen-subject. In this chapter I draw upon Laclau's idea of populist reason as well as recent anthropological work on affect to think through the relation between politics and affect.

Chapter 2 begins with a theoretical discussion of majorities and minorities within a secular liberal nation. It then proceeds to do a close reading of two films in which the story of a devotee-poet of the past is mobilized at two different moments in post-colonial Indian history to deal with the question of difference both within Hinduism and outside it. More specifically this chapter examines the ways in which Muslims and the Urdu language (both in the past and the present) are "made minor" in mainstream Telugu cinema and thereby in the general social and cultural imaginaries. I begin with a comparative analysis of two films that depict the life of the 17th century poet, Ramadasu who was a devotee of the Hindu God, Rama and was also a disciple of a Sufi fakir besides being an administrative official under the Muslim Qutub Shahi rulers of Golconda in South India. The first of these biographical films, *Bhakta Ramadasu* was made in 1964 and the second *Sri Ramadasu* recently in 2006. The earlier film is representative of the syncretic (Congress) approach to the Muslim presence in India while the later film reflects the majoritarian logic advanced by the Hindutva discourse. Despite this seemingly crucial difference, I conclude that both films are unable to imagine models for representing and negotiating differences or modes of toleration that overcome the limitations of liberal secularism.

Chapter 3 examines the question of gender in the cinematic conceptions of the citizen-devotee. The contradictions that traverse the nationalist ideal of femininity manifest themselves in the cinema of the 1950s and 60s in the form of a conflict between two

figures which have been central to the Telugu devotional genre—the *sati* and *sakti*—the good wife and the goddess. During this period a number of *sati* films were made—*Sati Savitri* (1953), *Sati Anasuya* (1957), and *Sati Sakku Bai* (1965). It is a well-known fact that these Hindu mythic characters of ideal wives provided the role models for imagining the ethics of good wifehood and in their secularized form determined the script for women's roles in popular cinema of all genres. In many of these films the goddess in her fierce and terrifying aspects, whose worship is usually associated with the superstitious lower castes, is dismissed as a sign of primitive nature. The goddess herself is therefore seen to be in need of reform and containment. In later decades, however, there is a perceptible shift in the relationship between the ideal wife and the goddess. No longer pitted against each other, they are figured more as allies despite the overall patriarchal logic that governs the narratives. Thus the fierce lower caste goddess who was the subject of reform in the first two decades after independence moved centre-stage in a series of fairly popular low-budget women's melodramas in the '70s and '80s. In the 1990s this subaltern goddess made a brief but spectacular bid for mainstream success.

This shift in the representation of the goddess is accompanied by a shift in the generic nature of the devotional film too. From being in the mode of the standard women's melodrama where the emotion of tragedy was predominant, the *bhakti* film of the '90s begins to display features of the horror film. In the last part of the chapter, drawing on feminist film theory as well as recent anthropological approaches to embodiment and cinema, I speculate on the reasons for these thematic and generic shifts and argue that the question of caste is crucial to this shift.

Chapter 4 in Part II of the dissertation explores questions of viewership through an anthropological study of film making, film criticism and viewership practices. In the context of the Indian cinema and of mythologicals in particular, we have a spectator who is anything but disembodied and disinterested. Rather we encounter a spectator who is not only entertained but who also experiences a deep sense of devotion, who offers prayers to the gods on screen and in the case of the sub-genre of the goddess films in Telugu and Tamil, is even moved to a state of possession. Film making and publicity try to highlight this aspect and explicitly address the spectator as devotee. One of the common practices in Telugu cinema has been the setting up of make-shift shrines in the premises of film theatres screening mythological and devotional films. The film viewer is therefore invited to pray and worship at these shrines before going in to watch the film itself. How do we understand these intersections between film viewership and religious practice? How can we theorize the figure of the viewer who is both film viewer and devotee at the same time?

I begin by examining the perceptions about the Indian spectator that are popular among the secular and rational elite. I track these through government reports on film and general print journalism. I pose these against actual practices of film making and viewing using the idea of *habitus* as elaborated by Asad and other scholars following him, to examine the conditions within which certain kinds of viewership practices might be forged. However, the end of this inquiry is not simply to demonstrate the culturally distinct orientations of Indian or Telugu viewers. The question I wish to pursue further is—in what ways does *habitus* change with the advent of modernity and modern ways of thinking and being? Hence, in the last section, adopting the framework suggested by

Chatterjee for the study of popular culture, I proceed to examine the ways in which disciplines in popular film culture are engaging with and adapting to the changing times and the influence of new kinds of discourses.

Part III of the dissertation titled, "Popular Religion and Culture in the Time of Governmentality" consists of two chapters. Chapter 5 reflects upon the way in which cinema and other media like the radio and television produce the "reality" of the citizen-devotee. Through the use of voice-overs, documentary footage and dual endings, mythological cinema foregrounds the "reality" of religious practice and religious identity. This chapter also explores the complex circuits of citation, relay and exchange between Telugu cinema and the Telugu print and electronic media that combine to produce the citizen-devotee.

Chapter 6 moves beyond cinema to examine contemporary challenges to the citizen-devotee formation. This chapter argues that governmentality not only defines the properly religious and circumscribes the limits of religion in social and political life but also produces subjects as devotees through governing their conduct and creating the conditions within which they can act meaningfully and effectively. However, as Foucault himself observes governmentality is the encounter between the technologies of domination and those of the self. Therefore, the chapter tells the story of the ways in which different groups and castes of people inhabit this category to challenge the dominant conception of the citizen-devotee, to expand its limits and at times to over-turn it. Hence, I discuss three examples of such "counter-practices" in contemporary Andhra Pradesh. The first is the new visibility gained by the lower-caste Bonalu festival in the nineties. It illustrates a process of de-sanskritization and assertion of a regional Telangana

and dalit-bahujan identity within the broad paradigm of Hinduism. The second example I discuss reveals a parallel but different politics at work. A reformist programme called *Dalita Govindam* was undertaken by the administration of a major Hindu temple in Andhra Pradesh to integrate the dalits and tribal communities into the mainstream Hindu fold. The strong opposition to this programme by Dalit parties and intellectuals and the resulting controversy introduce a dissonance in the homogenous narrative that cinema, media and the state construct of the Hindu citizen-devotee. The third example is drawn from a new strand of literature in Telugu called *Muslimvada Sahityam* (Muslimist Literature) which forges new narratives of citizenship for Muslims and through narrative alliances with lower castes and dalits reconfigures notions of majority and minority. What all these examples do is to return the supposedly religious and cultural to a broader realm that includes the social and the political.

Part I: History and Politics of Telugu Mythological and Devotional Films

Chapter One

From Representing Gods to Representing the Telugu People: NTR, Populism and Politics in the Vernacular

> By privileging rationality, both the aggregative and deliberative perspectives (of democracy) leave aside a central element which is the crucial role played by passions and affects in securing allegiance to democratic values….The failure of current democratic theory to tackle the question of citizenship is the consequence of their operating with a conception of the subject which sees individuals as prior to society, bearers of natural rights, and either utility-maximizing agents or rational subjects. In all cases they are abstracted from social and power relations, language, culture and the whole set of practices that make agency possible. What is precluded in these rationalistic approaches is the very question of what are the conditions of existence of a democratic subject.
>
> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*[1]

> Politics came to be practised increasingly in the vernacular—in two senses. Literally much of political discourse was carried on in the vernacular, in contrast to the first decades when English was the mandatory language of high politics. But more significantly, after the 1970s, the political imagination of major social groups came to be shaped by a kind of conceptual vernacular as well, used by politicians who did not have the conventional education through the medium of English and whose political thinking was not determined by their knowledge of European historical precedents.
>
> Sudipta Kaviraj, "A State of Contradictions: The Post-colonial State in India"[2]

The career of the popular Telugu film star, Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (1923-1996), who in the latter part of his career turned into a successful politician, presents us with an interesting instance with which to (re)think the relationship between religion, politics and the media. In his long and successful film career that began in 1949, NTR, as he is

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[1] Cited in (Laclau 2005) p. 168

[2] (Kaviraj 2010, 226)

popularly known, distinguished himself particularly as a mythological actor par excellence through his portrayal of varied mythic characters—both divine godly characters like Rama and Krishna and violent, demonic ones like Ravana and Duryodhana. In 1982, towards the end of his career, NTR set up a political party called the Telugu Desam (Telugu Nation), and within a short period of nine months, won the state elections to become the first non-Congress Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. This meteoric rise of NTR in the world of politics has been viewed as a puzzling phenomenon by social and political theorists of all hues. Most explanations, both journalistic and academic, pointed to the popularity of his mythological roles and argued that it was the "religiosity" and "credulity" of the common people that led them to ascribe divinity to him and therefore to support his party. The mythological determinism of this approach is premised on two mistaken assumptions—one, a simplistic notion of the mythological genre as presenting images of gods to be revered and two, belief in the naiveté of the audience which cannot distinguish actor from the roles of gods and heroes he plays.[3]

Arguing against such reductive claims, recent writings by M. Madhava Prasad (M. M. Prasad 2004) and S.V. Srinivas (Srinivas 2006) have sought to demonstrate the significance of the larger context of South Indian cinema and politics within which NTR emerges as a star who can legitimately claim to represent the Telugu nation.[4] Both draw attention to NTR's roles in the social melodramas in an effort to shift focus away from the mythological films. Both theorists provide us with new frameworks within which to

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[3] The most influential among these explanations was Chidananda Das Gupta's. (Das Gupta 1991)

[4] An article written by Joseph Elder & Peter Schmitthenner in 1985 titled "Film Fantasy and Populist Politics" is an interesting initial exploration of the ways in which NTR's film image was mobilized to support his political career. Despite many suggestive observations, both "fantasy" and "populism" remain under-theorized in the article. See (Elder and Schmitthenner 1985)

examine the cinema-politics link, and as will become evident, I am indebted to their rich insights in formulating my own arguments. At the same time, this chapter suggests that the question regarding the Telugu mythological remains inadequately addressed in both their works and that we need to produce an account of the ways in which NTR was shaped by the mythological as well as the ways in which he tried to shape it, first as an actor and later as a director. I argue that if our critical objective is neither to demonstrate a tight fit between the popularity of NTR mythological and his political success nor to dispute such an explanation by pointing to a host of "properly" social and political factors, then we might be able to arrive at a different account that is not ridden with liberal-secular anxieties about the spill-overs or "contaminations" between the fields of politics, popular entertainment and religion proper. I argue that we need to examine the particular ways in which NTR sought to literally embody Telugu-Hindu history, tradition and myth both through his physical appearance on screen and his voice. This might enable us to see ways in which the popular cinema reworks what we understand by 'religion' and 'tradition/heritage' to produce and authorize particular kinds of subjectivities which can emerge as political and representative. As Mouffe, cited above, has argued we need to rethink our earlier conceptions of who is the proper subject of democracy. People emerge as political subjects not simply as autonomous, secular and rational agents, but in and through particular historical and socio-cultural contexts. The particular configurations that emerge between the fields that we heuristically separate as religious, social, political and cultural cannot be predicted in advance nor can they be pre-judged by a normative model of modernity that decrees a strict separation between them. The dynamics of the mass-mediated publics created by cinema and religion in the

functioning of democracy needs to be explored. Therefore, an open-ended enquiry might help us understand the significant place that popular cinema and popular religion should occupy in any genealogical account of secular modernity and democracy in India.

Religion-Cinema-Politics: A Complex, Contingent and Historical Articulation

A contingent, even if complex, articulation between religion, cinema and politics has emerged in the history of South India. The South Indian film stars and their involvement in politics is a unique phenomenon that needs to be understood on its own terms. Two film stars, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) from Tamil Nadu and NTR from Andhra Pradesh have gone on to become Chief Ministers of their respective states, while Raj Kumar in Karnataka although never involved in electoral politics remained an authority figure in the state as a true representative of Kannada identity. This phenomenon, Prasad argues, is not simply about the infusion of star charisma into electoral politics which might be found in many places in the world, but rather it is a manifestation of a more complex link between cinema and politics that is historically specific to the South Indian case. He names it "cine-politics" (M. M. Prasad 2004) .

Prasad proceeds to provide a detailed and complex account of the early history of South Indian cinema where he charts the coming of sound and the growth of regional language cinemas. Crucial to his account is the rise of the male star from the 1950s onwards. Until the late 1940s female stars occupied a dominant position both in the film narratives and in the industry. Prasad puts forward the interesting argument that during colonial rule, "the overarching power of the colonizer rendered difficult the ideological conception of a

coherent patriarchal authority *internal* to the society." With the formation of the Indian

Republic in 1950, however, a reconstitution of authority became necessary. As a result,

Prasad concludes:

> The long-drawn process of a restructuring of the dominant narrative form
> which installs a new patriarchal order as the moral-legal framework within
> which narratives unfold is the background against which we must plot the rise
> to importance of male stars, whose image henceforth includes not only
> glamour and beauty but also the authority of a patriarchal figure. Nothing
> illustrates this more vividly than the *paternal* relation that these heroes often
> have with the heroines. At the height of their career as star-representatives of
> the linguistic community, these stars cannot indulge in romance without
> maintaining as a supplementary feature of their subjectivity, a paternal
> function which extends to all the characters in the film, including the heroine
> (M. M. Prasad 2004, 108).

These are extremely suggestive remarks and I think they can be fruitfully extended to

think about the mythological genre as well. I shall be taking up these for discussion

presently. At the moment let me turn to the theory Prasad offers to understand the

cinema-politics link. He refers to Marx's analysis in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where

Marx argues that the rise of Louis Bonaparte to power becomes possible due to the

collapse of the two orders of representation into one—the political representation

(*vertreten*) behaves like aesthetic representation (*darstellung)* and the French peasants

come to accept him as their leader. Prasad explains this phenomenon in the following

terms:

> Sometimes political representation is not effected through acts of election or
> delegation, but through substitution, i.e. through the unexpected arrival of a
> figure who seems to be already endowed with the legitimacy to represent us.
> In such instances, the figure of representation as substitution has the added
> dimension of *darstellen* or aesthetic representation. The two orders of
> representation, in other words, collapse into one (M. M. Prasad 2004, 109).

Therefore, in the case of each of the three stars Prasad identifies, MGR, NTR and Raj

Kumar, their representative status on the cinema screen collapses into a representative

status in the political arena whereby they are "recognized" as true and legitimate leaders of their respective linguistic communities/states. But what is the specific role played by the mythological films in this process, more so in the case of NTR?

It is indeed true, as Prasad states, that numerically speaking, NTR's socials far outnumber his mythologicals. However, I am wary of agreeing with the further assertion that Prasad makes namely that "it is through the socials that all three stars elaborated the persona that alone generates identificatory possibilities."[5] There is a definite negotiation of the questions of authority and legitimacy even in the mythologicals. The *puranic* characters like Rama and Krishna and the discussions around ethics in the epics remained (still remain?) a matter of lively debate, discussion and contestation in the Telugu social and cultural sphere well into the 70s when the mythological genre was still alive—they were not remote figures whose memories had faded in the secularized public sphere. Therefore, the mythologicals gave NTR readily recognizable traditional icons, like Krishna, Duryodhana, Karna, Ravana etc., to invoke once he staked claim to political representation. Moreover, Prasad himself agrees that unlike other South Indian stars, MGR and Raj Kumar who did not act in mythologicals, NTR was particularly associated with mythologicals even outside the state. Therefore, we can ignore these films and the role they played in conferring legitimacy upon NTR as a representative of the Telugu

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[5] This is a curious and cryptic statement. In his earlier work on the Hindi melodrama of the 1950s, Prasad had remarked that the hero of this kind of film is usually aristocratic, not a commoner and becomes available only for a *darsanic* view, not a voyeuristic view. Therefore, in psychoanalytic terms, the object of the *darsanic* gaze allows only for a symbolic identification not an imaginary identification. Prasad cites Zizek to clarify this point. Zizek argues that "In imaginary identification we imitate the other at the level of resemblance—we identify ourselves with the image of the other inasmuch as we are "like him", while in symbolic identification we identify ourself with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable, at the point which eludes resemblance." (Slavoj Zizek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) p. 109 cited in (M. M. Prasad 1998) p.76. In many of the Telugu mythological films which were melodramatic in nature, a symbolic identification in Zizek's terms is possible with the God/Star. Therefore, it is not clear what Prasad means by this statement here.

people only at the risk of reinforcing the simplistic association of the mythological with pure religiosity and further, religiosity as occupying a distinct sphere from politics. Indeed the caution that Prasad advises in relation to thinking through the cinema/politics question can be applied to the cinema/religion question too. Instead of assuming a distinction between cinema and politics, he argues, "... we must acknowledge that neither politics nor cinema as we know it (distinct from each other and with their respective roles marked out) remains the same. This is not to say that such distinction is unheard of in South Indian society, simply that the distinction was blurred, jettisoned in a specific fashion in order for cinema to function as a supplementary political apparatus (M. M. Prasad 2004, 103)." If cinema did function as a supplementary political apparatus as Prasad suggests, then this opens up many possibilities for reconceptualising the links between not only cinema and politics but also cinema, religion and political authority. Indeed, Laclau's theorization of populist reason describes well the way in which NTR's political project was able to tap into the affective and embodied relation to cinema and audio technologies like the radio and the cassette recorder that people had developed.

In the following sections I will be analyzing closely three significant and popular mythological films of NTR—*Mayabazaar* (1957), *Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam* (1965) and *Dana Veera Soora Karna* (1977) and a successful socio-fantasy, *Yamagola* (1977) in which he starred. In the first of these films, we see the birth of the star, NTR as god, Krishna. In the second film a further deification of the character is achieved through an iconic and frontal presentation of the star-god. In the third film which is the last successful Telugu mythological, this iconicity is challenged and dismantled to some extent and a different perspective is put in place. However, through cinematic devices of

doubling and tripling which allow NTR to play three roles in the same film, those of Krishna, Duryodhana (now renamed as Suyodhana) and Karna, the opposing perspectives converge on the figure of the star. In the last film, *Yamagola*, the death of the mythological and the decline of the power of the gods is announced through the arrival of the secular citizen-star who declares full autonomy and sovereignty. However, this birth of the secular citizen-star becomes possible not through a transition from a traditional mode of authority to a secular mode, but through a process of sublation, to use Hegel's idea. It is only through the simultaneous absorbing-and-surpassing of the mythological hero that this new kind of star is born. However, the mythological hero seems to remain active even within this formation for mobilization at apposite moments.

The Magic of Cinema: The First Krishna in *Mayabazaar*

This much-loved classic of Telugu cinema is based on a completely fabricated romance between two minor characters in the Mahabharata—Sasirekha, the daughter of Balarama and Abhimanyu, Arjuna and Subhadra's son. The romance and the related episodes that the film presents cannot be traced to any existing textual tradition either in Telugu or any other Indian language. The title itself is an anachronistic combining of Sanskrit and Persian—*maya* roughly translatable as "illusion" (or "fiction" as Spivak translates it) and *bazaar*, the Persian term for market. The film is irreverent to questions of both tradition and historicity. The action in *Mayabazaar* happens mostly in Dwaraka, the home of Krishna and Balarama, the Yadava rulers who are related to the Kauravas and Pandavas of Hastinapuram. Interestingly enough, the Pandavas do not make an appearance at all in

this film. In stark contrast to earlier mythologicals, the writer of the film, Pingali

Nagendra Rao introduced an easy colloquial speaking style that helped domesticate all

the epic characters.[6] Though there were *padyalu* and songs in the film, the dialogue

remained more or less close to the contemporary social film. The costumes and set design

by Gokhale too, like most Telugu mythologicals, were more imaginatively faithful rather

than historically realist.[7] As Anuradha Kapur argues in relation to Parsi theatre, the ways

in which *Mayabazaar's* narrative domesticates gods and heroes works against their iconic

deification (A. Kapur 1995).

Mayabazaar is primarily a romantic melodrama with comedy and visual spectacle as its

mainstays. The film takes great delight in the cinematic transformation of people and

objects. In slow dissolves, Ghatothkacha, the son of Bheema and a magician, transforms

into Sasirekha, the daughter of Balarama and back again several times; Krishna, the

handsome god-prince turns into a puny old man; a demon turns into a brick wall to

obstruct advancing enemies; objects appear and disappear at will. The special effects in

the film enable the kinetic movement of inanimate objects and present to the viewers a

veritable circus of objects. In the scene of the magic bazaar, clothes, footwear, utensils

and all kinds of other things appear, move and arrange themselves into neat rows. In

another scene, demanding wedding guests are taunted with a carpet that folds up on its

own and cots that spin around and beat up their occupants! And in the most memorable of

the film's scenes *laddus* and other eatables fly into the open mouth of a gigantic

Ghatothkacha who has made himself big in order to better enjoy the enormous amounts

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[6] In his unpublished chapter on mythological films, Madhava Prasad has made a similar point about the language in the film. I am grateful to Prasad for sharing with me this manuscript.

[7] The archway to Ghatothkacha's mountain ashram is borrowed from the historical archways of Sarnath discovered in the late 19th century.

of delicious food prepared for a wedding's guests! In the midst of all these, the director, K.V. Reddi introduces touches of realism to heighten the magic even more—as one food item remains stuck to the plate even after everything else has flown into Ghatothkacha's mouth, he scoops it up with his hand and eats it before throwing the plate away. In another scene, Ghatothkacha flies in and lands on a boulder which shudders under this impact and a small piece of rock breaks and falls to the ground. All these scenes are ostensibly meant to display the magic of Ghatothkacha and his assistants, but more importantly they are meant to astonish and delight the audiences by underscoring the magic of cinema itself and the technical mastery that Telugu cinema technicians had achieved. This the film accomplished in ample measure.

Krishna: Human or Divine?

In *Mayabazaar*, the role of Krishna, although acknowledged to be guiding everyone's actions, is by no means central. Neither is his divine status fully established. Only brief moments of iconic presentation of Krishna interrupt the narrative where each character is etched with psychological traits and motives that justify and propel narrative movement. In one of the film's initial scenes, Krishna is declared to be the prime reason behind Yudhishtara, the eldest Pandava's, successful completion of the *Rajasuya yajna* which made him the king among kings. But here no mention is made of his divinity.

Well-known actor, Raavi Kondala Rao narrates a revealing story behind NTR's first attempt to play the role of Krishna (Kondala Rao 2004, 21-22). When N.T. Rama Rao donned the make-up of the god Krishna for the film, *Mayabazaar*, he wasn't confident

about his own ability to play the part. However, on the first day of the shooting, as NTR dressed as Krishna walked down to the set, several crew members remarked how much he looked like the God Krishna! The first few shots when he played the role were met with so much appreciation and applause that his confidence grew by leaps and bounds. And of course, he went on to become the most popular screen Krishna of all times. The inside story, however, as Rao tells it is interesting. Understanding NTR's diffidence and anxiety, the director, K.V. Reddi had instructed several cast and crew members to enact great appreciation and admiration for NTR in the Krishna costume and make-up. This admiring recognition by others helped NTR recognize himself as Krishna. This story, whether true or not, makes it apparent that it was not just the actor's appearance and ability that mattered, but also recognition and appreciation by others. Furthermore, this story is entirely secular. Stories that circulated in later times talk about the piety involved in playing such roles and the bodily and dietary discipline that NTR was supposed to have adopted while playing mythological roles. At this moment, however, he was only beginning to see himself as a mythological actor. This episode is significant for the analysis I am pursuing here—it tells us the importance of the necessity of the people's recognition and projection of a figure as leader for the populist leader to emerge as an efficacious entity.

In the film, *Mayabazaar*, however, the narrative dwells on the ambiguity of Krishna as both human and divine. In a remarkable scene, an adult Krishna watches a performance of his own childhood legends. A child playing the role of young Krishna, and other dancers enact the legends of the child Krishna. Towards the end of the performance,

Krishna hears the piteous cries of Draupadi who at that very moment is being disrobed and humiliated in the Kaurava court in Hastinapuram many miles away. She is calling out to him for help. In one corner of the frame, we (the viewers) see and hear what he can see and hear with his divine powers. He seems to enter into a trance and involuntarily raises his hand into the *abhaya mudra* (raising the left hand, palm facing outwards in an act of assuring protection) and disrupts the act of *vastraapaharanam* (literally "stealing of clothes"). He magically supplies endless yards of cloth to ensure that Draupadi does not stand naked in front of the assembly. The others present in Dwaraka around Krishna and who being merely mortals cannot hear or see what he as Krishna can, shake him out of his trance. In response to their puzzled queries he reports the Kuravas' treacherous victory over the Pandavas and the humiliation that Draupadi was subjected to. This scene presents his power to hear and see something taking place far away as an involuntary and reflexive action. He seems to be possessed by this power—he has to be shaken out of the trance. The all-knowing, calm and unruffled smile that NTR/Krishna was to wear in all his later films is not yet fully present.

In his unpublished work on the mythological genre, Madhava Prasad comments on the use of the cinematic frame in this particular scene to simultaneously show action taking place in two locations. He says, "This is a remarkable instance of the use of cinematic possibilities to give spatial and temporal concreteness to a familiar incident. It imposes upon mythological events the order of historical time, re-interpreting divine intervention in the idiom of simultaneity. The trance-like position in which Krishna is shown also

contributes to the sense of a split between his human and divine qualities, the latter seen as 'taking over' his persona."[8]

Thus, in this scene in *Mayabazaar*, Krishna is still half-human and half-God. Contrast this with the film's closing scene where the entire extended family is reunited following the "real" wedding of Sasirekha and Abhimanyu. Here, we see Ghatothkacha giving credit to Krishna for having authored and successfully executed the entire plot. The film ends with a song that is sung in praise of Krishna as an *avatara* of Vishnu. As we see a smiling Krishna (NTR) slowly transform into the god Vishnu, the song, in true *puranic* style tells us that the audience acquires religious merit by listening to the tales of Vishnu. We notice that he had now moved away from the family tableau to a single frame where he offers himself for worship as it were. The entire family now transformed to a group of devotees looks to the right of the frame towards Krishna/NTR. The process of Krishna's deification is complete with this frontal, iconic presentation. Krishna's divinity gets established in the film through not so much the miracles he himself performs, but rather through the ones he authorizes and his ability to orchestrate people's actions by being in more places than one at the same time.

Historians have pointed out that neither the Krishna of the 'original' epic *Mahabharata* composed by Vyasa nor the Rama of the *Ramayana* written by Valmiki is a divine creature (Narayana Rao 2000), (Karve (1969) 1991). It is only in later centuries that devotional cults developed around these figures and new myths of their divinity were built around them. Further, during the 19th century, the work of the Orientalist and nationalist scholars resulted in a textualization of India's ancient traditions. New and

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[8] Madhava Prasad, Unpublished paper on the mythological genre in Indian cinema.

authentic editions of all major ancient texts were produced and many regional and folk versions of epics and Puranas were discredited as later interpolations. Historians sought to sift through the texts to gather the nuggets of true history from beneath the accretion of myth and fantasy. Several scholars have demonstrated the ways in which attitudes towards mythology and understandings of the past and history have been reshaped by secular modernity and the demands of the liberal nation-state.[9]

Partha Chatterjee has argued that the formation of the nation-state required a different relation to one's past. The modern subject had to learn to distinguish myth from fact and true history.[10] Kaviraj's work demonstrates how modern nationalism also brought with it new modes of reading and engaging with traditional religious texts. Focusing on the early nationalist, Bankim Chattopadhyaya's work, *Krsnacarita*, he argues that Bankim's Krishna was

> the first Krsna sought to be created by a genuine historical argument, that is not poetic, which self-consciously follows a method quite unlike the unrigorous procedure of narration of the Puranas…. Unlike texts in the Hindu tradition, Bankim's construction does not alter the earlier line of texts subtly, surreptitiously, by altering the totality of the image, gradually shifting its center of narrative gravity. Traditionally this was accomplished by adding new episodes to an old story, but in such a way that after a point the additions altered its truth. Bankim's work takes its historicity very seriously, differentiates sharply between itself and other texts, and brings into play the idea that one of these many images of Krishna must be true and the others false (Kaviraj 1995, 73).

In fact, as other scholars have pointed out, a textual Vedantic Hinduism which was truly rational and scientific was projected by reformist organizations such as the Arya Samaj. Puranic Hinduism considered 'a system of false beliefs and idolatry' and 'myth and

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[9] Over the last two decades an impressive amount of scholarship has emerged around the ways in which colonialism and nationalism have invented the "Hindu" tradition in the 19th century. See (Dalmia and Stietencron 1995), (Mani 1998) and (Sarkar 2001)

[10] See especially Chapter 4, "The Nation and its Pasts" and Chapter 5, "Histories and Nations" in (Chatterjee 1993).

poetry' was the Other of the new Vedic Hinduism and had to be exorcised from within the new modern national Self (Prakash 2003).

However, neither did the development towards rational modern history nor the efforts at creating a rational and scientific Vedic Hinduism proceed in a linear, teleological fashion to achieve a hegemonic status in Indian society. They did not succeed in completely obscuring earlier modes of thinking, reading and embodied modes of engaging with mythic material. Moreover, such secular nationalist projects did not anticipate the ways in which new technological media could work towards both preserving and sometimes reshaping or subverting earlier traditions. Therefore, secular and modern historical approaches to myths continue to compete with traditional *puranic* and embodied modes. Furthermore, the struggle and confrontation between such different modes constitutes the field of modern Hinduism. Cinema too partakes fully in the politics of these re-interpretations and reinventions of *puranic* characters by giving a new form and language to such endeavours. Hindi cinema with its aspiration to be a national cinema had to create a national secular space within its narrative frame in however tentative or fragile a fashion; not burdened with such expectations, different regional cinemas could persist with the mythological and devotional genres. These sustained and consolidated a regional linguistic nationalism through their narratives and modes of address.

At the same time we ought to remember that even within different language traditions, the temporalities of different cultural forms and genres have varied vastly. So, for instance, developments in the Telugu literary field consisting of different players and logics and governed by different material and economic conditions might be very different from the field of theatre and film. Moreover, despite significant overlaps, the

reading public was not the same as the theatre and film-going publics. In fact, there was considerable anxiety about the subaltern nature of the film-viewing public. Therefore, although not mutually exclusive or completely impervious to each other's influence, film genres and literary genres in Telugu followed very different trajectories.

The Aesthetics of Frontality and *Darsan*

In his early landmark work on Hindi cinema, Madhava Prasad identified the general structure of spectation in Indian cinema to be *darsanic* (M. M. Prasad 1998, 74-79). In the realist tradition of cinema, the non-presence of the spectator is a fiction to be maintained in order to allow for a voyeuristic view of unfolding events. Therefore, characters behave as if they don't know they are being watched. But Indian cinema imagines a spectator who approaches the cinema for a *darsan*, a practice of perception that is associated most commonly with devotees in a temple. The devotees go to the temple to get a glimpse, *darsan* of the god and to be in turn be seen by the God. "The practice signifies a mediated bringing to (god's) presence of the subject, who by being seen by the divine image, comes to be included in the order instituted and supported by that divinity. The mediation of this relation by the priest is not incidental but is integral to that structure (M. M. Prasad 1998, 75)." In relation to the cinema this implies that unlike the voyeuristic relation to the image on screen,

> .....in the *darsanic* relation the object gives itself to be seen and in so doing confers a privilege upon the spectator. The object of the darsanic gaze is a superior, a divine figure or a king who presents himself as a spectacle of dazzling splendour to his subjects, the *praja* or the people. Unlike the hero of a democratic narrative who is by common understanding 'any individual subject', the hero of the feudal family romance is not chosen randomly by the

camera but belongs to the class of the chosen in the extra-filmic hierarchic community (M. M. Prasad 1998, 75-76).

Therefore, Hindi cinema, especially in the 1950s to 70s, is dominated by this structure of spectation. Prasad argues that even in later years it has not been easy to subordinate the *darsanic* spectacle to an individualized point of view in the Hindi cinema. The individualized point of view and the aesthetics of realism that undergird it is quite different from the aesthetics of frontality that characterizes Indian performative traditions in general and cinema in particular. In the latter mode, "a message/meaning that derives from a transcendent source is transmitted to the spectator by the performance, whereas in the realist instance, no such transcendent source of meaning /message can be posited. Instead the text is figured as raw material for the production of meaning, the latter task being the spectator's by right (M. M. Prasad 1998, 21)." Realism thus presumes a generalized citizen figure as the reader/spectator of its narrative text through whose interpretive labour the text unfolds and gives its meaning. However, in the Indian context citizenship is not a right that everybody enjoys, it is viewed rather as a privilege of the few. Only some can be citizens while the rest are subjects.[11] How was this contradiction resolved? In the mythological genre we see that this contradiction between citizens and subjects is resolved through the production of the male star who acquires the legitimacy to represent the people through his roles in these films.

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[11] Susie Tharu's interesting work on the Gujarati writer, Saroj Pathak has also been extremely useful in thinking through the relation between realism and the citizen figure. She argues that in India, the tension between the two gives rise to an indigenous realism that produces the figure of an avant-garde citizen-executive who mediates between the state and the to-be-governed subjects. She identifies "a tension and an oscillation in the 'officiating' genres of the period (1950s &60s) between a frontality through which a message from the modernizing Symbolic is directly conveyed, and realist narration, between executive and liberal citizenship". See (Tharu 1998)

In the Telugu cinema of the 1960s and 70s, there are two seemingly divergent trends—one is the heightened deification and iconization of the God figure as we will see in the film I discuss next. When NTR played the roles of the God, Venkateswara in *Sri Venkateswara Mahatyam* (1960) and that of Rama in *Lava Kusa* (1963), not only was the image of the God/Star offered for a *darsanic* view on screen, but the conditions for *darsan* were sought to be recreated off-screen too. This was done, for instance, in the physical space of the theatre through the installation of that particular deity's idols in the premises for worship by spectator-devotees and the garlanding of huge cut-outs of the Star as God and so on. I discuss this interpellation of the spectator as devotee in greater detail in a later chapter on spectatorship. The second trend was that of an interrogation of the 'divine' undertaken by films like *Dana Veera Sura Karna* (1977) and the satirical view of the *puranic* mounted by the socio-fantasy genre exemplified best by *Yamagola*. However, the divergence is perhaps only apparent, because there is a point of convergence of these seemingly divergent trends and that is the film star, NTR and his voice! He is the pre-eminent citizen who can speak on behalf of the people. But how was this transformation achieved?

Krishna Darsana: The Deification of Krishna in *Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam* (1965)

From *Mayabazaar* in 1957 to *Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam* in 1965, NTR had travelled a long distance. He had established himself a star with many successful films in all genres and as the unparalleled Krishna of the Telugu screen. On a more general level, we should note the consolidation of the centrality of the male protagonist to the narratives in South

Indian cinema and the concomitant rise of the male star to a position of dominance in the film industry.

The film starts with the slow fade-in of an iconic and frontal frame of NTR as Krishna—first in silhouette and soon fully illuminated. Interrupting this iconic moment is a brief dialogue between Krishna and Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas who pleads with the former to be the protector of her sons saying that he is all powerful and an *avatar* of the god Vishnu. Krishna brushes off this ascription of divinity but only mildly. He promises her that he would protect the Pandavas from the machinations of the scheming Kauravas. The next shot of the film shows Krishna walk through a door in an elaborate archway. He once again stands in the centre of the screen in the *abhaya* posture—the posture assuring protection as the Pandavas stand to the right of the frame in a row bowing to him in postures of devotion and submission. The image is stilled and the credits appear on this frontal frame of Krishna blessing the Pandavas.[12] The main title of the film appears and this is followed by the screenplay and director's credit to NTR. NTR not only plays the role of Krishna, but is also the author of the film itself. Indeed throughout the film, Krishna is mostly seen frontally, standing in the centre of the frame with ornate archways in the background. These archways (sets created in studios) do not lend depth to the frame rather they lend to the image a two-dimensional effect of a calendar frame. It is after this film that NTR is widely believed to have achieved calendar status! Biographers of NTR and film historians have pointed out that NTR looked so "believable" and "real" as Krishna in this film that ordinary people are supposed to have framed his pictures for

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[12] In his essay on NTR, Srinivas describes a similar mode of introducing NTR, the star, in the 1969 social film appropriately titled *Kathanayakudu* "The Protagonist" (Srinivas 2006). The credits of the film appear on a freeze frame of NTR *recognizing* him to be a legitimate protagonist. This demonstrates that it is the star's popularity which decided how a character is introduced on screen, rather than generic conventions of the mythological or the social.

worship in their homes. The aesthetic relay of icons and motifs from calendar art to film and back to calendar art comes full circle! In the film, the repeated iconic framings of NTR as Krishna punctuate the flow of narrative events to emphasize the divinity of Krishna. In these iconic moments, the star as god stands smiling and still; the action has been stalled. Contained within the frame or in reverse shots are different characters transfixed as they gaze worshipfully at Krishna/NTR. Their bodily postures and facial expressions portray a deeply felt devotion. By inserting devotees within the filmic space, the film invites a worshipful gaze or rather actual worship from the film viewer. The viewer too is addressed as a devotee of the god. Whether or not this address always finds its addressee and if indeed the viewer ever fully occupies this position of the devotee remains ambiguous. For the moment, however, I focus on the cinematic text and the way it constructs the figures of the God/star and the devotee.

The greater part of the film's first half is devoted to the story of Rukmini's love for Krishna and their marriage through elopement. Rukmini has fallen in love with Krishna having heard of his physical beauty and his virtuous nature from the Sage Narada. But her brother wants her to marry Sisupala, the king of Chedi and fixes the date for the wedding against her wishes. Rukmini sends a message to Krishna asking him to come and take her away. Krishna arrives in his chariot on the day of the wedding and Rukmini elopes with him. Krishna's arrival provides the occasion for another iconic moment—Krishna on a chariot waiting for Rukmini. Framed once again against an archway, standing still on the chariot, one hand holding the reins, one leg bent and resting on the chariot's seat, faint smile on the face as he gazes out at Rukmini. But it is a gaze that seems not to have any specific resting point—it is a gaze that does not itself look, but

invites looking. It is so precisely because it is a moment offered for worshipful gazing not just by Rukmini, but by the viewers/spectators too.

This iconic frontal presentation literally reaches a climax in the final scene of the film. The eldest of the Pandava brothers, Yudhishtara, also known as Dharma Raja is the ruler of Indraprastha and has just performed the prestigious *Rajasuya* sacrifice. This sacrifice which involves many rituals accompanied by gifts and feasts to Brahmins and the assembled kings will allow him to declare his suzerainty as unchallenged king among kings. However, the *yajna* comes to a successful close only after one king from the gathered assembly of kings is identified as deserving of the highest honour. The Pandavas who refer to Krishna throughout the film as their *apathbandhu*, their saviour in distress, fully believe in his divinity and name him as deserving the highest honour. Bheeshma, the old and valiant patriarch of the Kuru family, and Dronacharya, the guru of the Pandavas and Kauravas, too support this move whole-heartedly. However, Shishupala the ruler of the kingdom of Chedi, already smarting under the humiliation of having his to-be bride Rukmini elope with Krishna, cannot now bear to see his enemy thus honoured. He opposes this honour and insults Krishna as a cunning and devious ruler; a low caste Yadava king not deserving of any respect and so on. Having patiently endured a hundred insults, Krishna can no longer withhold his rage when the hundredth and one insult is hurled at him. He summons his divine weapon, the *sudarsana chakra* and beheads Sisupala. The assembled kings flee in terror. Krishna assumes a gigantic form towering over the now puny Pandavas, Bheeshma and Drona. This is his *viswarupam,* literally, cosmic-form, which encompasses the earth and the entire cosmos! Ravikanth Nagaich's famous trick photography allows Krishna as Vishnu to multiply himself endlessly and to

display his omniscient presence! The film ends with this final *darsan* of the god to the

Pandavas but more importantly to the film's viewers.

NTR and his Doubles

In the Telugu stage tradition, there was a curious practice whereby a principal

character/role would be played by more than one actor. In the days when all-night

mythological plays were the norm, one actor would play a role in the first one or two acts

and another or even a third actor would take his place in the later acts. This was done

most often for the role of Krishna in the Mahabharata based plays. So the actors were

referred to as the *Okato Krishnudu* (First Krishna), *Rendo Krishnudu* (Second Krishna)

and so on.[13] In NTR's case, not only did cinema require that the same actor play the role

throughout the film, but cinematic technology enabled the same actor to play double,

triple or more roles. Therefore, in complete contrast to the stage traditions, NTR not only

reprised his role of Krishna many times in different films but also played several other

roles in those same films where he played the role of Krishna.

In *Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam*, alongside the deification and iconic presentation of

Krishna/NTR, another perspective is opened up with NTR's portrayal of the role of the

antagonist, Duryodhana, as well. Of course, this new angle was to find full elaboration

only in a later film. Duryodhana is here renamed Suyodhana but nevertheless appears as a

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[13] Well-known screen writer, D.V. Narasaraju recounts in his memoirs how a particular stage actor refused to remove his moustache despite the fact that the role of Krishna required a clean shaven face. Therefore, while the first Krishna would be without moustache, the second Krishna would be mustachioed. Narasaraju says that the audience didn't seem to mind, they simply called him *meesala krishnudu* (The Krishna with the moustache). See (Narasaraju 2006)

power-hungry, unscrupulous and haughty prince who wants to take over the Kuru

dynasty throne. Although the narrative focus on Duryodhana is quite brief in this film,

this character is developed in the later film, *Dana Veera Soora Karna* (1977) written and

directed by NTR himself.[14] In this film, NTR not only played the roles of Krishna and

Duryodhana once again but essayed the role of Karna as well. Although the film was

technically shoddy, NTR's triple role and the dialogues of the film made it a tremendous

success.

In the film versions popular amongst Telugu audiences, be it *Mayabazaar* (1957) or later

films like *Nartanasala* (1963), *Krishnaarjuna Yuddham* (1963), *Pandava Vanavasam*

(1965) among many others, the Pandava princes were the rightful heroes of the epic

Mahabharata and therefore enjoyed the support and affection of Krishna, the Yadava

prince who was believed to be the incarnation of the god, Vishnu. The Kaurava princes,

Duryodhana and Dussasana along with their uncle, Shakuni and their friend and vassal

king, Karna formed the evil foursome of the epic story (the *dushta chathustayam* as

Ghatothkacha in *Mayabazaar* proclaims!). However, drawing upon the influential anti-

Brahmanical rhetoric of writers like Tripuraneni Ramaswami Chaudari and inserting

contemporary questions of caste, the film, *Dana Veera Soora Karna* presents a very

different perspective. Kondaveeti Venkata Kavi, a well-known writer and member of the

Abhyudaya Rachaitala Sangham (Progressive Writers' Organization) wrote the script of

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[14] The grand costume and jewellery worn by Duryodhana/Suyodhana along with a black train with figures of snakes embroidered on it and the giant sculpted sitting lion which serves as his chair in his ornate chamber were all first designed by art director, T.V.S. Sarma in *Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam*. All of this was repeated in the 1977 film, *Dana Veera Sura Karna.* Much of the cast reprised their roles in the latter film and many scenes especially those involving Duryodhana's visit to the grand palace of wonders, *Mayasabha* commissioned by the Pandavas are reproduced almost frame by frame. But, as we will see later there are significant differences between the two films too.

the film. Duryodhana and Karna are now re-presented as righteous characters aware of the subtleties of *dharma* (ethics).

In the film, Karna is portrayed as a tragic hero who is abandoned by his unwed mother Kunti soon after birth and as one who suffers caste discrimination all his life. He is also the victim of several curses as a result of which he has to suffer a humiliating defeat and death on the battle-field despite being a powerful warrior. Duryodhana too is presented in a new light. He is now 'Suyodhana' and emerges as a champion of castelessness. In a competition held to test the battle skills of princes, Karna is refused admission because of his low-birth in a Suta (charioteer) family. He is the only one who can match the valiant Pandava prince, Arjuna's archery skills, and is therefore the only obstacle to a Pandava victory over the Kauravas. Therefore, in a dramatic and, no doubt, clever tactical move, Duryodhana proclaims his withering contempt for caste rules and elevates Karna to the position of royalty by bestowing upon him the kingship of one of his dominions. Kingship renders Karna's low-caste irrelevant and he is deemed to be eligible to take part in the competition. The film depicts Suyodhana's only hubris to be his pride and his willingness to be misled by his crafty uncle, Shakuni. Through such reworking of characters like Duryodhana and Karna as mighty warriors and learned and ethical men albeit with some fatal flaws, the film inserted into the Mahabharata mythology, contemporary questions of caste. Later when the film's rhetoric was mobilized for political campaigning by NTR in 1982, it was used to signal the rise of the Kamma caste (to which NTR belonged) and the backward castes (which formed a significant base for his political party) against the social and political dominance of the so-called upper

castes, Brahmins and Reddis. The Congress party dominated by Brahmins and Reddis had been in power in Andhra Pradesh since its formation in 1956.

Duryodhana's lengthy monologues in the film present a virulent attack on the caste system and question the privileges enjoyed by upper caste Kshatriya princes. Krishna's ethics too come under critical scrutiny as Duryodhana launches a powerful rhetoric against the despicable way in which the lower caste character Karna and the tribal character Ekalavya are treated by the Pandavas. The dialogue track of the film was also a huge success and circulated independently as gramophone records and audio cassettes. I shall be discussing the aural dimension of the film in a later section. The most interesting aspect of the film is however not the counter-narratives and reinterpretations of characters that it presents for, as we shall see later, it tries to balance its indictment of the unethical acts of the Pandavas and Krishna with attempts to ascribe blame to Shakuni and Duryodhana too. In cinematic terms, the most interesting aspect is the fact that NTR played three roles in this film. The possibility of doubling and tripling that cinematic technology enables requires some further reflection and discussion.

In the scene in *Mayabazaar* which I discussed earlier in this chapter, the use of a split screen to show simultaneously two scenes of action is an indicator of the mythological genre's exploitation of the possibilities offered by cinematic technology. In *Dana Veera Soora Karna*, the split screen is employed, but towards establishing NTR as Star. In one of the romantic songs of the film, NTR playing three different roles is shown through intercuts to be romancing three different women in different locations. Towards the end, all three couples are shown together through splitting the screen into three vertical parts. Unlike the *Mayabazaar* scene, this technique does not serve any narrative function of

indicating simultaneity of action rather it only serves to underscore NTR's virtuosity in being able to play three different roles in the same film.

In fact, the film's focus on NTR as star who can play with equal felicity the role of Krishna as well as the roles of his opponents, Duryodhana and Karna, contains the force of its anti-caste rhetoric. The second part of the film features many well-known *padyalu* taken from the famous play *Pandava Udyoga Vijayalu* written by the duo Tirupati Venkata Kavulu. The use of these well-known verses seeks to mitigate or rather blunt the force of the anti-Pandava and anti-Krishna rhetoric that Duryodhana launches in the first part of the film. The familiar *padyalu* reassure the spectator that Krishna might appear devious but is so only in the service of *dharma*. The film seeks to both deify the character of Krishna as well as to elevate the characters of Karna and Duryodhana. In this process what it achieves is the foregrounding of the film star, NTR, as an exceptional subject who can both affirm and critique the Hindu tradition at the same time.

Embodying History and Tradition: NTR's Populist Reason

> Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political.
>
> --Ernesto Laclau (Laclau 2005)

NTR's desire to portray varied roles in the same film reached a new record when he played five roles in a later mythological film *Srimad Virata Parvam (1979)*. But the proliferation of NTR's doubles did not quite end there. While discussing NTR's films of the late seventies and eighties i.e the period just before he plunged into politics, S.V.

Srinivas makes an interesting observation which is quite relevant to the discussion at hand (Srinivas 2006). In 1982, NTR acted in a social film called *Justice Choudhary* in which he plays the role of a judge. In a song that dramatizes a difficult situation he is faced with, the film draws attention to the similarity between his predicament and that of mythological characters by inserting brief sequences from three different mythological films featuring NTR himself. As Srinivas rightly points out, "The issue here is not the projection of NTR in god-like terms. What the film is trying to do is *not* to put in place a credulous spectator who believes that NTR is a god. Instead it posits a spectator whose civilizational past is thoroughly mediated by the cinema. And it is a cinema, which has NTR at its centre (Srinivas 2006, 40)." [15] The sublation of the mythological hero to produce the authoritative secular citizen and its reactivation at different moments in the NTR oeuvre is evident in this instance. It also provides us with an important clue to the process by which NTR was able to literally embody Telugu history and tradition and thereby elaborate a politics of the vernacular, as Kaviraj has so insightfully described post-1970s politics in India (Kaviraj 2010).

To pursue a related line of enquiry, we can also now see what was novel about the critique the ethics of Rama or Krishna presented by NTR's films. Although by no means radically new or scandalous, they performed an important function. The multiplication of

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[15] There is an apocryphal story about the row of statues NTR instituted in the capital city, Hyderabad when he came to power as Chief Minister in 1983. NTR commissioned a set of 24 bronze statues of all the "great" people in Andhra history. These statues were placed along the Hussain Sagar lake front, popularly called Tank Bund and they soon became a tourist attraction in the city. The list of greats included predictable figures like---medieval historical personages, 19th century social reformer, Veeresalingam; 20th century poets and writers like Sri Sri, Gurram Joshua and Maqdoom Mohiuddin and less predictable ones like stage perfomer, Ballari Raghava and the colonial administrator, Sir Arthur Cotton. However, the uncanny effect of the statues is that if one looks closely at all the statues, so the story goes, one can find NTR's features reflected faintly in most of them!

NTR into many roles allows for uncomfortable questions to be raised but at the same time absorbs the subversiveness of that critique. The attack on the gods cannot be by anyone— only a star who always-already embodies the mythical tradition can claim the legitimate authority to launch a satirical attack on the gods. In other words, he is an exceptional citizen. Is it any surprise then the first two socio-fantasies which ruthlessly satirized the *puranic* gods and the conventions of the *puranic* cinema featured NTR as the rational and secular human protagonist?[16]

In a recent work titled, *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau makes several interesting points that are useful to think through the NTR phenomenon (Laclau 2005). According to Laclau, the formation of the "people" is central to any political process. However, this category of the people is not an empirical or sociological reality. It comes into existence through the articulation of a socio-political demand. But the heterogeneity of demands requires that a horizontal equivalence be established between them. This process is achieved through what Laclau calls an "empty signifier". The empty signifier is however not mere emptiness—it is a hegemonic force which presents "its own particularity as the empty universality that transcends it. So it is not the case that there is a particularity that which simply occupies an empty place, but a particularity which, because it has succeeded, through a hegemonic struggle, in becoming the empty signifier of the community, has a legitimate claim to occupy that space (Laclau 2005, 170)." In the case of NTR and the Telugu Desam party, the Telugu identity performed the role of the empty signifier. This contingent and historical mobilization of the Telugu identity helped to articulate a series of equivalential demands like the dissatisfaction with upper-caste

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[16] *Devanatakudu (*1960) and *Yamagola* (1977) were the first two socio-fantasies made in Telugu.

Congress politics dominated by the party at the Centre; the political and economic aspirations of the *kamma* caste; demands for equality being made by the women's movement and other middle level and backward castes; all of these were forged together by a Telugu regional and cultural identity which could be posed against the north-Indian, Delhi-based Centre.

Speaking of the centrality of the mass leader in populist politics, Laclau observes that a political representative does not simply transmit the will of the people he represents. Rather his function is "to give credibility to that will in a milieu different from the one in which it was originally constituted. That will is always the will of a sectorial group, and the representative has to show that it is compatible with the interests of the community as a whole (Laclau 2005, 158)." Moreover, he goes as far as arguing that neither the "people" nor "popular will" exist in any concrete fashion before the act of representation. He states that the construction of the "people" would be impossible without the operation of mechanisms of representation.

In the case of NTR, then it was perhaps not simply the collapse of the two orders of representation (political and aesthetic) as suggested by Prasad, but rather that NTR's screen image was able to provide the ingredients for legitimizing his representative claims and the forging of the Telugu identity. It was not as if a Telugu identity did not exist before—it did and had indeed provided the basis for the political struggle that led to the creation of the first linguistic state in the Indian union in 1953; however, in the eighties NTR revived it as an unfulfilled and pressing political demand and who was better suited to enunciate this demand than one who already embodied Telugu identity— NTR himself!

Affect and Populism: What is the Link?

Laclau remarks that affect plays a central, even if unacknowledged, role in the

constitution of popular identities and thereby in populist politics.

> As we have seen, equivalential logic is decisive in the formation of popular
> identities, and in these substitutive/equivalential operations the imbrications
> of signification and affect is most fully visible. This is the dimension that, as
> we recall, early theoreticians of mass society saw as most problematic, and
> involving a major threat to social rationality. And in contemporary rationalist
> reconstructions of social sciences, from structuralism to rational choice, this
> is also the pole that is systematically demoted at the expense of the
> combinatorial/symbolic one,   which allows for a 'grammatical' or 'logical'
> calculation (Laclau 2005, 228).

Although Laclau does not himself provide an adequate theoretical account of what he

means by affect, we can turn to a body of rich and sophisticated work in recent

anthropology which has elaborated upon and given density to not only the idea of affect

but also related ideas such as embodiment, *habitus* and the visceral register in the creation

of subjectivities (Asad 2003), (Hirschkind 2006), (Mazzarella 2009) . As Hirschkind

remarked:

> It is increasingly difficult to sustain an image of political life that does not
> include recognition of the role of embodied sensibilities and pre-reflexive
> habits in shaping our commitments and reasons. Political judgements are not
> the product of rational argumentation alone but also of the way we come to
> care deeply about certain issues, feel passionately attached to certain
> positions, as well as the traditions of practice through which such attachments
> and commitments have been sedimented into our emotional-volitional
> equipment (Hirschkind 2006, 30).

As I have noted in my introduction to this dissertation, cinema and other audio

technologies like the gramophone, radio and cassette players created new kinds of

listening and viewing subjects. A new enthusiasm for the possibilities created by these

new media were combined with earlier embodied modes of listening and viewing

associated with folk and traditional performative practices. Hence, NTR's body and voice provided the affective aspect of this new populist demand through his literal embodiment of Telugu myth and history as well as its modern present. As popular film star he could claim to be the Telugu nation's first citizen and legitimate representative of the Telugu people. Let me now elaborate on the important question of the "voice" which I have only alluded to in passing thus far.

The Voice of the Secular Citizen-Subject in *Yamagola* (1977)

> By what incomprehensible thoughtlessness can we, in considering what after all is called the talking picture, "forget" the voice?
>
> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (Chion 1999)

Yamagola was the first successful film in the sub-genre called the socio-fantasy that emerged as the mythological declined.[17] NTR plays the role of Satyam, who is an idealistic young man who actively fights against injustice and corruption in the village and is even elected as *gram sarpanch*, the village leader. When he is killed by the villains, he reaches *narakam* (the equivalent of hell in Hindu mythology), over which Yama, the God of Death, reigns. As the film unfolds, NTR launches a rational and satirical tirade against outdated gods and their outdated practices. He even organizes a

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[17] The term "socio-fantasy" is used by the film industry itself. In Telugu it is usually only transcribed not translated. The films in this genre narrativize encounters between modern Hindu men and gods and other divine creatures from Hindu mythology. They usually feature a contest between the gods (usually Vedic gods like Yama, Kubera, and Indra who are lower down in the hierarchy of modern reformed Hinduism) and humans. The human *jati* (race) always claims a higher moral ground than the gods who are invariably flawed and compromised in one way or the other. The human hero who is a modern ethical citizen-subject always triumphs over his outdated opponents from heaven or hell. *Manavatvam* (Humanity) always wins over *Daivatvam* (Divinity). It is as if there is a cross-cultural critique that is mounted on the gods—modern secularized humans are the ones who set the standards and always find the gods to be falling short of these ethical standards.

labour strike among the workers in Hell. The gods are shown to be literally anachronisms when, due to various twists and turns in the plot, they come to earth and find themselves to be utterly ill-equipped to deal with the modern world—they don't understand the idea of money and are terrified of the traffic. Indeed, much of the humour in the socio-fantasy is derived from portraying gods as bumpkins whose 'first contact' with the modern world leaves them overwhelmed and disoriented. They realize that they need the help of the protagonist, Satyam if they are to resolve the crisis they are caught in.

In *Yamagola*, the heroism of the human hero consists mainly in his ability to out-talk the God of Death, Yama whom he meets after death in Hell. Employing the tropes of comedy and satire, the film foregrounds the protagonist's rhetorical skills as he sometimes gently rebukes Yama for his outdated classical mythological speech style and at other times strongly criticizes his outmoded legal system. As Yama chokes and coughs with the exertion following a long monologue full of high-sounding alliterative Sanskritised Telugu, NTR offers him Vicks lozenges and persuades him to henceforth adopt a speaking style that is in simple and lucid Telugu. He himself uses a logical and rational speech style that is nevertheless forceful and relentless in its interrogation of the Gods and their ethics. A seeming master of many speech styles, the protagonist, Satyam played by the star, NTR, (whose star-persona no doubt provides the necessary persuasive force and conviction) chooses as modern Indian citizen (*bharatadesa pourudu*) to speak the language of modern law and the constitution, not the speech of *mythos* but the speech of *logos*—the speech of reasoned propositions.[18] Along with ridiculing the ornate speech

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[18] D.V. Narasaraju, the writer of *Yamagola* had earlier planned for NTR to play the mythological role of Yama and for NTR's son, Balakrishna who had just then entered films to play the role of Satyam, the young protagonist. Narasaraju thought that the father-son verbal duels would make for an interesting film.

style of Yama, he also parodies the popular speech of the Leftists as he instigates the

workers in Hell to organize a labour strike. He compares Yama's dictatorial rule over

Hell to the national Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975. But is this really a

movement from mythos to logos or is there a different logic at work?

In an essay published in 1996, Bruce Lincoln contests the popular narrative about the

beginnings of Western civilization as a movement from mythos to logos i.e. of the way in

which "fables gave way to logic, anthropomorphism to abstraction, poetry to dialectic,

and religion to philosophy" (Lincoln 1996, 2). Going back to early Greek usages of the

terms, *mythos* and *logos*, Lincoln uncovers a different history of use and a different logic

associated with these terms. Lincoln concludes that we ought to remember that neither

mythos nor logos had the fixed meaning that we assume that they had. "Rather these

words and others were the sites of important semantic struggles fought between rival

regimes of truth (Lincoln 1996, 11)."

Like the narrative about mythos and logos, some conventional narratives of Indian

cinema sees the movement away from song and verse and melodramatic dialogue to more

prosaic and everyday speech forms as the move toward greater realism. Is this really so?

Or should we instead ask, what is altered with the decline of the mythological? It is as if

the mythological genre is able to modernize itself only by realizing the only true modern

function of myth, i.e., as a vehicle of political allegory. Another important factor in this

process is to recognize the need for a heroic male protagonist who is able to historicize

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But having listened to the script, NTR decided that the role of Satyam needed someone who carried more weight as an actor, someone whose speeches would be forceful and persuasive. In other words, it ought to be someone who already embodies the mythic style—therefore who better than himself?! So, he declared that he would play the role of Satyam and let his senior colleague, Satyanarayana play the role of Yama. See (Narasaraju 2004, 61-66)

tradition, maintain a critical relationship to it and assert his own sovereignty as autonomous political and ethical agent as well as true representative of the Hindu tradition. The decline of the mythological is thus mediated by the arrival of the fully sovereign Hindu male star who can speak back to the Gods and speak for, on behalf of humans. NTR who had earlier successfully represented gods, kings and heroes on screen can now successfully represent people. Only he can be the true voice of the sovereign citizen. But how is his voice materialized in cinema?

The Voice of the Male Star: Dubbing and Playback Singing in Telugu Cinema

As film theorist, Mary Ann Doane points out film technicians give primary importance to the dialogue. "Sound effects and music are subservient to dialogue and it is above all, the intelligibility of the dialogue which is at stake, together with its nuances of tone (Doane 1980)." This is because the primary task of sound in a talkie is to provide us access to the psychological interiority of a fully present individual. "Sound and image, married together propose a drama of the individual, of psychological realism. 'Knowledge' of the interior life of the individual can be grounded more readily on the fullness and spontaneity of his or her speech doubled by the rhetorical strategies of music and sound effects (as well as *mise-en-scene*) (Doane 1980, 55)." She asserts further that editing practices in sound seeks to preserve the status of speech as an individual property right.

The French film theorist, Michel Chion too has identified this tendency in film as 'vococentrism'—a tendency to privilege the human voice above all other sounds. The ear picks out the voice from among all the sounds in a scene which include ambient sounds

and background music. And as Doane points out, film makers actually work towards consolidating this 'vococentrism'. However, Chion thinks that the film medium is fundamentally dualistic in nature.

> The sound film, for its part, is dualistic. Its dualism is hidden or disavowed to varying extents; sometimes cinema's split is even on display. The physical nature of film necessarily makes an incision or cut between the body and the voice. Then the cinema does its best to restitch the two together at the seam (Chion 1999, 125).

The film camera captures the images of actors acting, while the sound recorder records the voices. In the final film, both image and sound are arranged in a synchronous manner to create the illusion that the voice emanates from the moving lips on screen. Background music and other sound effects are also added but it is the synchronization of sound and the speaking body which produces the "married print" that is ready for exhibition to an audience. Michel Chion's work demonstrates that this work of re-stitching that the cinema attempts is not always successful even in Western cinema where the "nailing down" of sound to body is pursued with meticulousness and care.

In the case of the Indian cinema, the matching of voice and body is rendered even more problematic because there is usually a difference in the speaking and singing voices of actors. In the early decades of sound films, there were singing stars who sang and spoke in their own voices. But with the arrival of playback singing in the 1940s, there was a split between the singing and speaking voices. While actors dubbed their own voices for the speaking portions of the film, when they sang, they sang with voices other than their own. In other words, while each actor dubbed the speaking portions for himself or herself, the playback singer sang the songs for them. In the mythological films, this was compounded by the singing of not only songs but also the singing of verse. Not always

did the same singer sing both songs and verses (*padyalu*) for a single actor, sometimes not even the same singer sang all the songs for a particular actor in a film. Therefore, it was possible for the same actor to have different singing voices in the course of a film. Filmmakers did try to match the singing voice to the actor's body by attempting to find a singer's voice that was closest in tone to that of the actor. Although this was not always possible, by repeatedly making the same singer sing for a particular actor, a close identification was achieved between the singer's voice and actor's body.[19] However, since actors far outnumbered singers, usually the same set of singers sang for many, many actors. And since, songs occupied a special place in the film narrative, many liberties that realism did not approve of, were allowed here. Moreover, the audio track of the songs was consumed independently through gramophone records, the radio and later audio cassettes and more lately CDs, the matching of singing voice and body has not been seen as a particular problem.

In Telugu too, more or less, the same situation prevailed. The singer, Ghantasala dominated the singing scene from the fifties to the late sixties. He sang for all the top male protagonists—NTR, ANR, Kantha Rao and others. There were other minor singers who sang special genres like comic or tragic songs or the songs for minor characters in the film.

But the speaking voice and dialogue portions of the films presented problems which are more in common with the Western films. Most actors in Hindi and Telugu cinemas dubbed for themselves. This ensured that the speaking voice of the actor and his body

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[19] Hence, the Hindi actor, Raj Kapoor always had only the singer, Mukesh sing for him. But in the case of Dev Anand, another star-actor of the time, two successful singers, Mohammed Rafi and Kishore Kumar both used to sing in equal measure.

were closely identified and constituted a unified, coherent and continuous subjectivity. If as Madhava Prasad has argued the decades of the fifties and the sixties were crucial for the establishment of a new patriarchal order which was accomplished by the increasing centrality of the male protagonist in the filmic narrative and the accompanying rise of the male star, then the voice played an extremely important role in this process. There were two aspects to this process. Not only did South Indian male stars as representatives of their respective language communities *not* act in other language films than their own but also couldn't allow other voices to dub for them. Female actors, character actors and sometimes comic actors moved freely between languages in the fifties and even the sixties but this became increasingly difficult for the male star-actor. So, actors like Savitri, a female super star of the fifties and sixties and S.V. Ranga Rao, a character actor, both were able to have successful careers in both Telugu and Tamil cinemas. But star-actors like MGR and Sivaji Ganesan from Tamil and NTR and ANR from Telugu could seldom cross-over into other language cinemas. This is a tradition which continued into later decades.

The Curious Case of Mimicry Playback

From the eighties onwards it became common practice for dubbing voices to be freely used for female actors.[20] Around the same time that female stars began to have different

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[20] So, even popular heroines of the eighties and nineties like Radhika, Radha, Vijayashanti and Soundarya had their voices dubbed. But no male actor who aspired to play lead roles and achieve star status could ever think of having someone dub for him. Whatever the quality of the actor's voice—thin and high-pitched or hollow and unclear—he dubbed for himself. If he had a poor diction or was not able to enunciate clearly, he worked on it and sooner or later was able to do the job however inadequately. The practice of female actors having their voices dubbed by dubbing artistes reached a new high in the nineties when the trend of

dubbing voices, i.e., voice doubles, a curious phenomenon is noticeable with regard to the

male stars. By the seventies, NTR and ANR had established themselves as the two

dominant male stars of the Telugu film industry. Ghantasala, the singer who had sung for

both of them through the fifties and the sixties was now dead; S.P. Balasubramaniam who

was his successor began to sing for both stars. But what is interesting was not this change

in the singing voice of these actors from that of Ghantasala to Balasubramaniam. The

difference lay elsewhere. Singers like Ghantasala and even the early Balasubramaniam

gave a lot of importance to a good rendition of the song—so the focus was on the correct

enunciation of words (*uccharana*), the knowledge of the right pitch, scale and rhythm

(*sruti* and *tala gnanam*) and the correct reproduction of the emotion (*bhavam*) of the song

but they never attempted to reproduce the tone of the actor for whom they were singing.

But Balasubramaniam in addition to being an efficient singer was also a good mimic.

Therefore, he soon began to mimic the speaking style of each of these actors while

singing for them. This "mimicry" style of playback singing was definitely a new

phenomenon and this meant that just by hearing a song one could easily recognise it as an

NTR or ANR song. This style of playback singing can be heard in *Dana Veera Soora*

Karna and *Yamagola* both films that I have discussed here. Among the three roles that

NTR played in *Dana Veera Soora Karna*, Balasubramaniam sang the songs and *padyalu*

"importing" glamorous actresses from Bombay became prominent. Many of these actresses do not know
the Telugu language and no demand is made upon them by the filmmakers to actually learn the language
because the assumption is that their voices can be dubbed. As a result in contemporary Telugu cinema there
are only two or three voices that are heard for a number of "heroines". This complete split between body
and voice seems possible only in the case of the female actors. This could be interpreted in two ways—one,
that only a certain kind of voice is deemed fit to be the voice of the female protagonist. Whereas new and
glamorous faces are admissible, the voice ought to remain the same; or two, we might say that the female
character is not seen to be a coherent and individual subject in the first place and therefore does not require
the matching of voice and body that a male character needs.

for the role of Duryodhana and his singing style in the film exemplifies what I described as mimicry playback. It appears as if the rise of the male star to a position of dominance required that the disjuncture between his speaking and singing voice too be erased or concealed as far as was possible. The separate identity that the singer's voice retained in the earlier style of playback now is sought to be merged with that of the actor's voice, so that the male-star can emerge as a fully self-sufficient and "synchronous man" as Chion puts it.

Speaking Back to the Centre: **Elaborating a Politics of the Vernacular**

The tremendous popularity of the gramophone records and audio-cassettes featuring the sound tracks of NTR films like *Lava Kusa*, *Dana Veera Soora Karna* and *Yamagola* prefigured the role that the audio cassette was to play in the short but intensive election campaign that NTR would run in 1983--84. These tapes which were recordings of NTR's political speeches drew a great deal from his film career. As Elder and Schmitthenner have noted, the election campaign speech tapes combined monologues from films with NTR's political speeches in ways which made it difficult to separate the two (Elder and Schmitthenner 1985, 381). The speeches clearly reiterated NTR's prowess as a forceful speaker whose training as an actor would allow him to subtly vary tone and pitch, now to seduce his listeners with vistas of what an altered political landscape would look like, now to project righteous rage against the domination of the Telugu people by the centrally-commanded Congress regime, now to assert that his main goal was to restore

the pride of the Telugu people (*Telugujati Atmagauravam*); and now to persuade them into placing faith in his schemes for the poor like 2 rupees a kg of rice and so on.

NTR's ability to speak forcefully and challenge the ruling power, all in flawless and chaste Telugu, became a measure of his efficacy in itself. It would be a serious critical error to underestimate the importance of proper speech and rhetoric for a politician and a leader. Hence a figure on screen is recognized as a leader when he is able to give forceful voice and body to particular aspirations and desires. And further embodied in that voice were memories of the forceful monologues and dialogues from his earlier films where as both king and commoner he had opposed the oppression of the poor and the tyranny of the rich and powerful. He had voiced the ideals of kingship as the prince in *Rajamakutam* and the ideals of the god-king, Sri Rama in *Lava Kusa*. The quality of his voice and his impeccable diction had captivated Telugu ears as only a few other actors were able to do.[21] Of course later on his voice style was to congeal into an exaggerated and hyperbolic verbal histrionics that characterized his films after the late seventies. This is what stage comics and mimicry artists reproduce today.

One aspect of NTR's political promise was definitely his defiant posture—his ability to speak back to the centre! As several political commentators have noted the high-handed practice of the Congress High Command in New Delhi to change Chief Ministers of the state at will and within short periods of time was resented a great deal by the local leaders of the state. This resentment received a powerful articulation in NTR's rhetoric. In speech

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[21] S .V. Ranga Rao was perhaps the only other actor of this time whose distinctive voice and imposing physique made him an ideal mythological actor. Ranga Rao won the best actor award at the 1964 Afro-Asian Film Festival held in Jakarta for his role as Keechaka in the film, *Nartanasala* (1963; dir: Kamalakara Kameswara Rao). NTR played the role of Bheema, the second among the Pandava brothers and accomplished warrior and wrestler.

after speech he asserted that the will of the people of the state had no value for the Congress party which was enslaved by the centre. Regional aspirations had no hope of fulfilment in this scenario—therefore a change of leadership was imperative and this could be provided only by a new party that was home-grown and rooted in the local Telugu culture and society—the Telugu Desam (the Telugu nation). This sub-national demand was of course a long time in the making and had indeed led to the formation of a separate state of Andhra Pradesh on the basis of language. NTR's political task was clear. He had to first prove that the separate state was merely a formal granting of autonomy. His claim was that this vernacular autonomy now had to be rendered substantial.[22]

Who can Inherit the Voice?

I will end this chapter with two examples from films made in the 2000s, but which invoke the mythologicals and re-emphasize the ways in which speech and voice make the male protagonist into a true hero and leader. However, the political context is now an altered one—on the one hand was the bid made by right-wing Hindutva politics of the nineties and thereafter to create a pan-Indian Hindu political subjectivity and on the other hand the numerous new subaltern political subjectivities such as the Dalit, OBC, minority and Telangana identity which challenge the homogeneity of the Telugu identity.

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[22] Perhaps not unsurprisingly, once NTR came to power he lasted only for a little over one term and was severely criticized for his unsustainable populism and his totalitarian style of functioning. See (Kohli 1988). But as Laclau remarks totalitarianism and fascism are ever present dangers of democratic politics as much as they are of populism. "Totalitarianism, however, although it is opposed to democracy has emerged within the terrain of the democractic revolution." (Laclau 2005) p. 165

In the film *Khadgam*[23] a Hindu past is claimed through the invocation of the cinematic genealogy of the heroic speech tradition taken especially from the mythological and historical genres. Ravi Teja, a popular male star of the 2000s, plays the role of a Hindu youth who is an enthusiastic Hindu nationalist (note that unlike NTR he is not a Telugu nationalist). He is also an aspiring actor. Stuck in the position of junior artiste, he is resentful of actors who make it big simply by virtue of being star sons. In one significant scene, where a historical anti-colonial film is being shot, the lead actor is unable to deliver the long and difficult monologue that he is required to. An irritated and impatient Ravi Teja steps in and outperforms the actor by delivering without pause or error the long monologue and thereby displays his virtuosity as an actor and true Hindu nationalist![24]

The second example I discuss is the claim to inheritance made by NTR's grandson not through the invocation of Hindu nationalism but a Telugu cinematic nationalism. NTR Jr., NTR's grandson who entered films and became a star in the 2000s, repeatedly performs his inheritance by delivering long monologues. He earned a name for himself by his ability for clear enunciation of the Telugu language just like his grandfather. To showcase this inheritance, a film was made recently called *Yamadonga*. The film is a pastiche of elements borrowed from several popular Telugu mythologicals of the past while drawing its main plotline from NTR's socio-fantasy, *Yamagola,* discussed earlier.

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[23] The film is quite shrill in its advocacy of a view of Indian society shaped by the Hindutva discourse. There is a good Muslim patriot and bad Muslim terrorist. The two are brothers and the good one kills his own brother once he realizes that the latter is a terrorist. This logic which demands that the Muslim citizen prove his patriotism by sacrificing/disowning his own kin is an obvious point that needs no further elaboration. In the 2002 Nandi Awards sponsored by the Andhra Pradesh State Government, the film *Khadgam* won the Sarojini Naidu Award for Best Feature Film on National Integration and Communal Harmony. Krishna Vamsi, the director won the Nandi Award for Best Director. Actor Prakash Raj won the Nandi award for best supporting actor for his role in the film and Ravi Teja won special jury award for his portrayal in the same film. See http://www.thehindu.com/2004/02/15/stories/2004021509250300.htm

[24] Is it more than a coincidence that the Hindu nationalist figures in the recent Hindi films, *Hey Ram* and *Rang De Basanti* are both skilled rhetoricians?!

The film is an attempt at ventriloquism. The voice and image of the late star are reproduced digitally and he dances, sings and talks with the young actor. All this in the hope that the viewers will be persuaded that Junior is indeed a chip of the old block!

In the on-going battles over representation—both aesthetic and political, there are many claimants to the old Telugu voice. The hegemony of the singular commanding and guiding voice has been challenged by new entrants into the cultural and political field voicing their demands in the name of new political subjectivities based on subaltern genders, castes and communities. However, the shrillest claimants to the old crumbling hegemony remain those who lay claim to the inheritance of the screen image and voice. Therefore the sons and grandsons of NTR repeatedly perform and proclaim their relationship to the former leader, as if that in itself is sufficient proof of their ability to be political representatives. In NTR Junior, whose features bear some resemblance to the late star and whose considerable rhetorical skills have kindled the hope that the Voice can be reproduced, the NTR clan and the Telugu Desam party have now reposed their faith. Meanwhile, Chiranjeevi who succeeded as Megastar in the film field after the decline of NTR desperately tries to stake claim to representative status in the political field along with his acting clan consisting of actor-brother, actor-son and actor-nephew and producer-brother-in-law.[25] In this battle of film-political families, the screen has indeed become the virtual political field where each successful hit or flop is treated as rising or declining political share value. But this of course only seeks to unsuccessfully mask the fact that newer popular political subjectivities are contesting earlier hegemonic formations.

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[25] For a detailed account of Chiranjeevi's career up to his recent entry into politics, see (S. Srinivas 2009)

Chapter Two

<u>The Exemplary Citizen-Devotee and the Other: Negotiating History and Religious</u>
<u>Difference on Screen</u>

> The public sphere is not an empty space for carrying out debates. It is
> constituted by the sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes—
> of speakers and listeners. And also by the manner in which they exist (and are
> made to exist) for each other, and by their propensity to act or react in
> distinctive ways. Thus the introduction of new discourses may result in the
> disruption of established assumptions structuring debates in the public sphere.
> More strongly, they may have to disrupt existing assumptions to be heard.

<div align="right">

Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* [26]

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The last chapter discussed the ways in which NTR's populism rested upon the

deployment of a Telugu identity fused with a particular conception of history and myth as

the "empty signifier" that was able to pull together various socio-political demands of the

time. Central to this process was the production of NTR, the star, as an exceptional

citizen who embodied this Telugu identity and hence was the pre-eminent choice for the

status of representative. At first glance, it might seem as if the mythological genre in

Telugu is untroubled by the question of religious difference, set as the stories are in

mythical time before the arrival of other religions, Christianity or Islam and hence

reinforcing the common misconception that Hinduism was the original religion of the

land and that all the inhabitants were Hindu prior to the arrival of the Abrahamic religions

from outside.[27] However, as the discussion in the last chapter reveals, the question of

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[26] (Asad 2003)

[27] Some recent scholarship attempts to re-examine and move beyond existing paradigms of understanding
medieval Indian history, particularly South Indian history and the ways in which the coming of Islam and
the 'origins' of Muslims in India are narrativized. See (Eaton 2000), (Bayly 1992), (Alam 1996) and (Amin
2005)

caste forces its way into the mythological genre in various ways and destabilizes the supposed coherence and homogeneity of Hinduism as a religion. This will be even more dramatically evident in the devotional films featuring goddesses which I discuss in the next chapter. In the current chapter, I explore the political and cultural logics that preceded and succeded the hegemonic mobilization of a Telugu identity achieved by NTR at a particular moment in the history of Andhra Pradesh. A certain imagination of the relation between language, history and identity is crucial to both these moments, but the Telugu that appears here is quite different from the particular significations that NTR mobilized. The Telugu/Hindu identity is now paired with or posed in opposition to a Muslim/Urdu identity.

My examination proceeds through a close reading of two films in which the story of a devotee-poet of the past is mobilized at two different moments in post-colonial Indian history to deal with the question of difference both within Hinduism and outside it. More specifically this chapter examines the ways in which Muslims and the Urdu language (both in the past and the present) are "made minor" in mainstream Telugu cinema and thereby in the general social and cultural imaginaries. I begin with a comparative analysis of two films that depict the life of the 17th century poet, Ramadasu, who was a devotee of the Hindu God, Rama, and was also a disciple of a Sufi fakir, besides being an administrative official under the Muslim Qutub Shahi rulers of Golconda in South India. The first of these biographical films, *Bhakta Ramadasu* was made in 1964 (prior to the NTR moment) and the second, *Sri Ramadasu* recently in 2006 (well after the NTR and Telugu Desam politics have been challenged and overtaken).

Rethinking Minority and Nation

As Partha Chatterjee demonstrates in one of his essays, a conception of Indian history as consisting of the glorious classical Hindu period followed by a dark period of decline with the coming of Muslim rule was the necessary pre-condition for the development of anti-colonial nationalist discourse and the formation of the modern Indian state.

> The idea that 'Indian nationalism' is synonymous with 'Hindu nationalism' is not the vestige of some premodern religious conception. It is an entirely modern, rationalist and historicist idea. Like other modern ideologies, it allows for a central role of the state in the modernization of society and strongly defends the state's unity and sovereignty. Its appeal is not religious but political. In this sense, the framework of this reasoning is entirely secular (Chatterjee 1995, 126).

However, this particular conception is not simply a shortcoming of the way in which the Indian nation was imagined into being. Rather as William Connolly argues the modern state requires a common history and identity to construct its idea of a nation. Such an idea of a nation functions as a regulative ideal in the elaboration of modern theories of liberalism and secularism. He argues, "the operational boundaries of individuality, rights, and justice are quietly set in advance by the parameters of the liberal nation (Connolly 1999)." He cites from J.S. Mill to give a sense of what is believed to secure the regulative ideal of the nation:

> Sometimes it is the effect of *identity* of race and descent. *Community* of language and *community* of religion greatly contribute to it. Geographical limits are one of its causes. But the strongest of all is *identity* of political antecedents; the possession of a *national* history and consequent community of recollections; *collective* pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the *same* incidents in the past (Connolly 1999, 81).

But given the history of the Indian nation and the formation of the Hindu and Muslim communities and the narratives that sustain these identities, is it at all possible to fashion such a collective pride? This idea of the national community, Connolly argues, gives rise to an image of the nation that is marked by a sense that the density at its very center is always indispensable but seldom sufficiently available. "This distinctive combination in the regulative ideal of the nation makes the state particularly vulnerable to takeover attempts by constituencies who claim to embody in themselves the unity that is necessary to the nation but so far absent from it." This is exactly the logic that enables the majoritarianism of the Hindu right wing in India. While claiming to be committed to a version of liberal secularism, it is able to critique the secular liberal policies followed by other political parties as "pseudo-secular" and as "appeasement of minorities".[28]

Therefore, as Connolly says, the decentering of the nation is a necessary precondition for the refashioning of secularism. He proposes a new model for imagining the nation—as a pluralist rhizomatic network where the cultural density is not at the center of the nation but is "made up of intersecting and interdependent minorities of numerous types and sorts who occupy the same territorial space and who negotiate an ethos of engagement between themselves. (Connolly 1999, 92)" However, is this ideal possible or actualizable? As Connolly himself admits, there are no guarantees.

Pursuing a related set of critical concerns, Talal Asad reminds us that what is being envisioned here is not simply recognition of a particular identity but it is "a matter of

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[28] Chatterjee's article on the contradictions of the discourse of secularism and toleration makes this point eloquently. (Chatterjee 1998).While his attempt to find political solutions to the crisis of secularism is an important one, finding ways of refashioning the cultural imagination of the nation-state too is no less significant, without necessarily resorting to an uncritical celebration of the resources offered by a tolerant popular culture as Ashish Nandy does. See (Nandy 1998)

embodied memories and practices that are articulated by traditions, and of political institutions through which these traditions can be fully represented…[the] focus should be on what it takes to live particular ways of life continuously, cooperatively, and unselfconsciously (Asad 2003, 178)." He thinks that if we replace the idea of secular (empty, homogeneous) time with an idea of complex space and heterogeneous time where a multiplicity of overlapping bonds and identities are possible and recognized as such without being considered a threat to national unity, then it might be possible for everyone to live as a minority among minorities.

As recent work by Shabnum Tejani has shown us the ideas of majority and minority in India were themselves forged through a complex process by which the question of caste was elided to secure community along religious lines (Tejani 2007). Despite the efforts of leaders like Ambedkar, the vast numbers of Dalits (untouchable castes) and tribals were regarded as being part of the Hindu fold and this paved the way for the formation of a Hindu majority and the Muslim and Christian communities as minorities. Therefore, I analyze the two films at length to explore the different ways in which both films construct the figure of the Hindu devotee as citizen in opposition to a Muslim Other as well as Hinduism's internal Others—the lower-caste and the tribal . While I examined the issue of 'voice' in the creation of the NTR star-persona, I extend that exploration to include the general role of aurality (sound, music and use of language) in the two films. I also examine the differences in the star personas and performance of the two lead actors in these films and their role in constructing identity and difference. The 1964 film is representative of the syncretic (Congress) approach to the Muslim presence in India, while the 2006 film reflects the majoritarian logic advanced by the Hindutva discourse.

Despite this seemingly crucial difference, I conclude that both films are unable to imagine models for representing and negotiating differences or modes of toleration that overcome the limitations of liberal secularism.

A Narrative of the Nation, for the Nation

Ramadasu is best known to most middle-class Telugu people today through his *kirtanalu*[29]. These songs are sung in traditional forms of performance and they are part of the repertoire of South Indian classical Carnatic musicians. They have also often featured in films. The best-known and respected renditions of these *kirtanalu* remain those of the famous Carnatic musician, Mangalampalli Balamurali Krishna.

Born as Kancherla Gopanna in 1620, Ramadasu was the son of Kancherla Lingayya Mantri who seems to have held an administrative post under the Qutub Shahi rulers of Golconda. He was born in the village, Nelakonda palli, which is in the Telanagana region of present-day Andhra Pradesh. He was also the nephew of two Brahmin ministers, Akkanna and Madanna who also served under the Qutub Shahis. Most accounts tell us that he became a *tahsildar* (tax collector) of Bhadrachalam with the help of his uncles and the patronage of Mir Jumla, a minister under Sultan Abdullah. According to one source, Gopanna served as *tahsildar* between 1650--1665 (Anon 1951). During this time he built a temple for Rama at Bhadrachalam using some of the revenue that he had collected on behalf of the Sultan in his capacity as tax collector. For this crime, he was imprisoned in 1665 by Sultan Abdullah and after twelve years was released in 1677 by the then Sultan,

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[29] The *kirtana* (*kirtan* in Hindi) is a genre of devotional songs

Abul Hasan Tanashah (1674--1699), popularly known as Tani Shah in Telugu. During his long and arduous imprisonment he is believed to have written several *kiratanalu* in praise of Rama. At the end of 12 years, Rama and Lakshmana are supposed to have appeared in disguise before the Sultan and repaid the money that was owed to him by Ramadasu. When the Sultan realized that it was none other than the divine beings who appeared before him, he was a repentant man. Not only did he free Ramadasu but also offered the revenue from the Bhadrachalam jagir as a gift to the temple in perpetuity. Along with the songs, this story of Ramadasu's life with some variations has been in circulation orally for a very long time. An extremely popular stage adaptation was done by Dharmavaram Gopalacharyulu and was performed all over the Telugu regions in the early part of the 20th century.[30]

The 1964 film, *Bhakta Ramadasu* that V. Nagayya directed and acted in, begins as a lesson in history. The titles are displayed on a still shot of the actual Bhadrachalam Rama temple accompanied by one of Ramadasu's famous kirtana, "*Adigo Bhadradri Gautami, Adigo Chudandi*" (Look! There is the Bhadra mountain and here is the Gautami river!) in the background. After the titles, a pan shot reveals an aerial view of the temple before the scene shifts indoors. Inside we see a group of devotees worshipping the deities in the sanctorum. Among them are a group of children brought there by a schoolteacher from Ramapuram (in Telugu films and literature it is a sort of generic name for any village). The students are curious about the history of the temple. The priest informs them that by a fortuitous stroke Ramadasu who had built the temple is present there and would be able

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[30] See (Srikanta Sarma 1995, 173-193). Sarma states that the version he examined was the eighth edition of the play released in 1946. So, the play was probably written in the 1910s or thereabouts.

to tell them the entire story. A now aged Ramadasu readily agrees to tell them the story of the temple construction not only because he is pleased with the curiosity of the children but also because as future citizens they need to know this story. As is evident by now the narrative of a devotee is already framed as a story that is necessary not as a fable that will inspire more faith in the god, Rama but as a story that has its role to play in an understanding of the nation's past.

There is a further interesting behind-the-scenes angle to the link the film has to narratives of the nation. In his autobiography, Nagayya records an extremely interesting story behind the production of *Bhakta Ramadasu* (Nagayya 2004, 101-103). Nagayya started work on the Ramadasu story in 1946 at the behest of the then Hyderabad Prime Minister, Mir Laik Ali and through the mediation of the eminent print media personality, Sri Eswar Dutt. It was the time of the Razakar movement and Laik Ali and Eswar Dutt felt that the story of Ramadasu would promote Hindu-Muslim amity and unity.[31] Therefore, Nagayya was invited as state guest and taken on a tour to the places associated with Ramadasu— Golconda, Bhadrachalam, Nalgonda and Nizamabad. He prepared the story with the help of Boorgula Ramakrishna Rao[32] and Eswar Dutt and later even narrated it to Prime Minister Laik Ali and other eminent people of the town. Laik Ali even promised the Nizam government's funding for the making of the film. However, this was not to be as a

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[31] The Razakars were the volunteer army of the Majlis Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen commanded by Kasim Razvi and supported by the then Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan. The Nizam who wanted to preseve his authority as ruler of an independent state used the Razakars to crush the pro-Indian Union democratic movement gaining momentum in his territory after India gained independence from the British on August 15, 1947. The Razakars persecuted a number of Hindus in the state of Hyderabad especially Communists who were leading the armed struggle against the Nizam.

[32] Boorgula Ramakrishna Rao was a prominent Congress party leader of the time who later went to become the first Chief Minister of the Andhra State formed in 1953.

series of political events that occurred as the script was being finalized stopped its

production. The newly independent Indian nation-state launched the Police Action that

led to the fall of the Nizam and the forcible inclusion of the Hyderabad state in the Indian

Union.[33] It was only in 1959 that work on the film was resumed, this time however with

Nagayya's own initiative. It was completed and released after many delays in 1964 and

was a great popular success.

Muslim Rulers and Hindu Subjects

Going against the popular perception of Muslim rule as oppressive, the film presents us

with a positive portrayal of the Sultan. The film introduces Abul Hasan Tani Shah with a

Hindustani song of praise, "*Mubarak ho, mubarak ho!*" as he ceremoniously enters his

court. Through the song we are also introduced to his wife and his daughter who are

present in court. His ministers and other courtiers add to the visual pomp and splendour

of the Golconda court. Although this song is in Hindustani, when the king speaks he does

so in chaste Telugu. I will have more to say about the politics of language use in this film

later. The very first words Tani Shah utters proclaim his secular and liberal credentials.

He declares that under his rule all his subjects can rest assured that their religious and

social practices will not be in any way hindered. He later felicitates his two Hindu

ministers, Akkanna and Madanna as well as his spiritual guide at court, a Maulvi. The

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[33] "Police Action" is the term that is widely used to refer to the September 1948 armed intervention of the newly established state of independent India in Hyderabad state. Hyderabad state was "freed" from the Nizam and merged into the Indian Union. The large scale violence inflicted upon Muslims (widely believed to be far greater than the violence of the Razakars) in the state following the Police Action has largely been ignored by historians and remains an under-discussed even in general popular discourse. The only exception is the collection of essays in (Khalidi 1988). Also see the magazine article, Noorani, A. G. (2001). Of a Massacre Untold. Frontline. 18.

entire scene serves to underscore the point that Tani Shah was a secular, benevolent ruler who while paying due respect to the spiritual guidance offered by the Maulvi did not exclude Hindus from his court and administration.

In the tradition of the melodrama, the film foregrounds the family as the primary site for exploring the nature of Hindu-Muslim interactions. There are three short scenes that establish the friendly and caring familial interactions between the ruling family and that of his Hindu ministers. Following the death of Gopanna's mother, his uncles Akkanna and Madanna bring the orphaned and distraught Gopanna with them to Golconda. There, we see the king's wife, Sitara Begum offering Madanna's wife, Shyamalamba her condolences and affectionately enquiring about Gopanna. Well-known actresses, Tanguturi Surya Kumari and Rishyendramani, played the characters—Sitara Begum and Shyamalamba respectively thereby rendering these characters legible and familiar. They are 'just like' two middle-class neighbors exchanging notes about their respective families and their domestic obligations. This scene segues smoothly into a parallel scene where the king is also seen offering his condolences and counsel to his ministers and the young Gopanna. This scene is followed by another brief one in which the young daughters of the Sultan and Madanna engage in an intimate girlish exchange about the latter's cousin, Gopanna and his looks.

An equally interesting scene that appears later on in the film portrays relations of cordiality and common celebration of the Bakrid festival. The festival is not an occasion for prayer, ritual or any other recognizable religious activity. Instead, it is presented as essentially a secular festive time for children. The children belonging to the royal family and other elite of the court stage a nationalist pageant wherein different dance-forms of

India like Kuchipudi and Kathakali are demonstrated. The song accompanying the

celebration is a mixture of Telugu and Hindi verses and verges on predictable and

familiar nationalist exhortations to children to respect the mother country, Bharat (not

Golconda or Hindustan) and be willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the *watan*

(country). Following the performance, the sultan, who had been watching the show along

with his Hindu ministers and his Maulvi, remarks how wonderful it would be to become

children again and to be carefree and presumably to be free of religious identities. That a

film about a 17th century devotee-poet becomes the occasion for comment on a modern

idea of a secular childhood as innocent, spontaneous and generous should not surprise us

in the least. The film itself, as I mentioned above, begins as a lesson in history for

children.[34] It is not uncommon for contemporary themes to find new enframements in

myth and history. And schooling, as is only too well known, has been one of the key

areas for the elaboration and inculcation of a secular nationalist agenda of the Indian

state.

Who is Kabir?

An interesting parallel to this elite interaction is the representation of the popularity of a

Muslim fakir named Kabir among the general populace of Golconda kingdom. It is the

fakir who initiates Gopanna into Rama *bhakti*. While Gopanna is in a state of despair

following the death of his mother (his father died when Gopanna was a child), he

overhears a Hindustani song (a Kabir bhajan) that philosophizes about the transience of

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[34] Shahid Amin mentions that when Ram Gharib Chaube, the senior clerk in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India, published a popular tract on the languages of India called *Bhashavigyankur* in 1899, he declared it was for "the benefit of the children of this country"(Amin 2005, 27). Children have been the primary addressees of many a nationalist work of scholarship and art. *Sri Ramadasu*, unlike Nagayya's film, does not address itself to children.

human life and the futility of mourning for those dead and gone. The song exhorts the listeners to chant the name of Rama to be free of all troubles. Mesmerized by the song, Gopanna follows the voice and the camera reveals to us first a Hindu temple façade and then pans down to reveal a Muslim fakir (identifiable as such by his attire and his beard) who is singing this song as he sets out to wander the streets of the village. This metonymic association of the Muslim fakir with the Hindu temple and Hindu gods is a visual representational strategy that recurs through the film. A disciple who appears to be Hindu follows him and some women also appearing to be Hindu are shown making offerings of food to the fakir. Gopanna follows the fakir who towards the end of his song approaches a group of Hindu-appearing devotees who we later learn have gathered there for free meals being organized by the fakir. Anticipating Gopanna's bewilderment at a Muslim fakir worshipping Ram, Kabir says that the contradiction is only apparent. All religions are but paths that lead to God and Allah, Ram and Rahim are all one.

Literary critics have pointed out that Kabir in the Ramadasu narrative is an anachronism. They argue that Kabir, the widely known poet-saint of the Bhakti movement, lived in the 15th century and Ramadasu belonged to the 17th century and that Ramadasu's guru was most probably someone called Raghunatha Bhatta.[35] Furthermore, as scholars of the 15th century Kabir have pointed out, the Ram invoked by him is not the Ram of Ayodhya but a formless, attribute-less form of Divinity. Moreover, that Kabir was a lower-caste *julaha*, a weaver and came to be recognized as the pre-eminent poet among the *nirgun* bhakti poets of northern India.[36] Nevertheless, Kabir as a devotee of the Ayodhya Rama,

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[35] (Srikanta Sarma, Alanati Naatakalu 1995)

[36] For a complex and critical account of the nirgun bhakti of Kabir and his "Ram", see (Wakankar 2005)

was a prominent figure in the stage play and in the films that were made subsequently too.[37] However, pointing to the obvious anachronism or the mistaken identity of his Rama, is of much less interest than trying to answer the question of what is it that necessitates a figure like Kabir in the story of Ramadasu's life? What function does it serve? How does it inflect our understanding of the Islamic presence in medieval India and in the imagining of the nation's past and present?

The important work done by Bayly and Eaton on the spread of Islam in the Deccan region and in other parts of South India suggests that fakirs and /or Sufi preachers were largely responsible for conversions to Islam and for Sufi philosophy and practice to gain popularity at the local level among common folk especially the lower castes. Bayly suggests that interactions between existing cults of Siva, Vishnu and Sakti, and the Muslim pirs led to a rich and varied religious culture and convergence of practices where elements from each were borrowed, incorporated or rejected and abandoned by the other (Bayly 1992). It was neither a case simply of assimilation or co-option nor was it all confrontation; nor did the narratives and practices remain static, many changed over time within the medieval period itself. Referring to the culture of *dargahs* and the many Sufi *pirs* (holy teachers) who are revered all over south India, she asserts that the "Muslim cult saint has always been a figure who may leap the boundaries between 'Hindu' and 'non-

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[37] However, the biographical account of Ramadasu published by the famous Vavilla Press in 1951 makes no mention of Kabir or any such Muslim guru. See (Anon 1951)

Hindu', 'Islamic' and non-Islamic. He is therefore a figure who has moved in a sacred

landscape which would be familiar to almost any south Indian."[38]

However, there is another, more contemporary genealogy of this figure that we can trace.

The name Kabir stands as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity in the narratives of secular-

nationalism in India. As Wakankar has pointed out in his insightful study, the name

'Kabir' signifies many things—it carries the weight of many "competing claims for

nation in such terms as tradition, history and community (Wakankar 2005)".[39] And

related to this there also exists a cinematic genealogy to the figure of Kabir. His life has

been the subject of many films in the history of early Indian cinema and it is primarily in

the cause of communal harmony that his name has been repeatedly invoked. Nagayya's

own account of the involvement of the Hyderabad Nizam in the early stages of the film's

production that I have described above provides us with a further clue to the function of

the name, Kabir.

Kabir performs a crucial function in the film's narrative too. He appears at crucial points

in order to resolve narrative crises. It is through his powerful intervention that Gopanna's

son is miraculously brought back to life after he is believed to be dead; it is Kabir who

initiates Gopanna's wife and son into Rama bhakti and re-names Gopanna as Ramadasu,

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[38] Muzzafar Alam also provides a parallel yet slightly different account of the role of Sufi pirs in medieval Awadh in northern India. Using the example of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century Sufi saint, Saiyid Shah 'Abd-ur-Razzaq Bansawi, he argues that Indo-Islamic encounters were complex and multi-dimensional and varied considerably over time and across different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The Sufis, Alam argues, were neither other-worldly mystics nor political manipulators but social and political mediators. Although Basnawi was an orthodox Sufi, he accepted many Hindu beliefs and supported their myths and memories. Indeed there are many legends of him having had visions of Rama and Krishna and of having aided many Hindus in attaining these visions. It appears that it is such a "supposedly liminal" medieval figure that is represented through the character of Kabir in the play on Ramadasu and both the films based on his life. (Alam 1996)

[39] (Wakankar 2005)

and later it is he who tries to mediate with the sultan to secure Ramadasu's release from prison and death sentence. His spiritual authority is established early on in the film. He visits the makeshift Rama temple set up by Dammakka on the Bhadrachalam hills but is refused entry by the local *dharmakarta* (temple administrator) because he is a *Mohammediyudu* (a Mohammedan or Muslim). Gopanna arrives there and tries to convince the people about Kabir's power and greatness. No one is willing to listen to him, what is more he too is refused entry because of his association with a Muslim. As both of them leave the temple, the Ram idols disappear! It is only after Kabir and Gopanna are brought back with due respect and when Kabir pleads with the deity through a song, that the idols reappear.[40]

The representation of a powerful and influential Muslim fakir might at first sight seem a desirable and progressive move that reinforces the film's 'secular' credentials. However, this secular account detaches the fakir from a Muslim and Islamic milieu. At no point in the film do we see any Muslims among the followers of Kabir. The common religious Muslim (believer/devotee) or the convert to Islam is conspicuous by his/her absence almost throughout the film. For sure, even the Sultan is respectful of the fakir as a holy man but the point still remains that we hardly ever see any of his Muslim followers. Neither is the tricky question of conversion ever broached. It is Kabir's own tolerance of Hinduism that is in evidence rather than tolerance extended to Muslims by the majority Hindu population. The film seems to imply that Kabir is a charismatic and unique individual who is unlike other less tolerant Muslims, among whom the film includes the

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[40] Examples of such legends of Sufi pirs who displayed their spiritual prowess over the local Hindu gods and goddesses and yogis were aplenty in the medieval period. (Alam 1996), (Amin 2005), (Bayly 1992), (Eaton 2000) give several similar examples. However sectarian narratives played a very different role in the medieval period. When such narratives are 'reconstellated' in the historiography of the modern nation state, their function is of a completely different kind.

Maulvi at the Sultan's court. He is distinguished precisely because he has recognized the divinity of Rama although he is a Muslim. In the framework of secularity that the film espouses, tolerance is something that the majority extends to the minority. Even though, it might seem that in 17th century Golconda, the Hindus are in a minority position under the Muslim ruler; in the cinematic imagination that is filtered through contemporary politics and a contemporary notion of the nation's past, the minority status has already shifted to the Muslims. A certain benevolent patronage is extended to them. This is much evident in the 2006 film on Ramadasu.

Kabir in 2006

In many ways, *Sri Ramadasu* reflects the new political configuration of militant Hindu nationalism. Its aim is not to promote a secular, syncretic view of the past, rather it is to forcefully assert a unified Hinduness as the core value of the Indian nation. Hence it is not surprising to note that there are many significant differences between the portrayals of Kabir in the two Ramadasu films. While Kabir is still acknowledged as Ramadasu's guru, there are many subtle ways in which the film shifts narrative agency to Ramadasu and to the divine interventions of the god, Rama himself. To begin with, in the new film, Kabir makes a rather late entry. He is not the one who initiates Gopanna into *Ramabhakti*; it is Dammakka, the tribal woman who is an ardent Rama devotee who persuades him to become a *bhakta*. She does so not through providing spiritual guidance but through her almost 'innocent' and 'naïve' *bhakti*—a form of *bhakti* usually reserved for women and lower castes in Telugu cinema. The only way Kabir is able to enter this narrative is by following up his cry of Allah, with a song extolling the greatness of Rama. Indeed it is

the recognition of a shared Rama bhakti that draws Kabir and Ramadasu together. Unlike the earlier Kabir of 1964, the 2006 Kabir not only talks in Telugu but also sings in a highly classicized and Sanskritised Telugu. There are no Hindustani songs; and the use of Hindustani is restricted to occasional usage by the Sultan, his courtiers and other staff.

Furthermore, Kabir's spiritual authority is displayed not through miracles that he is able to effect, but instead through his superior knowledge of Telugu mythology and astrology. The legend of the disappearance of Rama's idols when Kabir is refused entry into the temple is not used in the new film. Instead, it is Ramadasu who brings the idols outside into the temple courtyard to provide Kabir a darshan of the deity. He also uses the occasion to proclaim that henceforth the annual wedding ritual of the gods would be performed not in the temple sanctorum but outside to enable devotees of all castes and religions to witness and participate in the ritual.[41] This is just one example of the many subtle ways in which Ramadasu's *bhakti* and supposed ethical behavior establishes him as the film's protagonist while considerably marginalizing Kabir's role in the narrative.

The Mythological in the Devotional

As we have seen in the above sections, Nagayya's film, *Bhakta Ramadasu* devotes considerable part of the narrative in bestowing the characters of Ramadasu as well as the Sultan Tani Shah with a psychological interiority and a social setting in which they live

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[41] The *Seetarama Kalyanam* (The Wedding of Rama and Seeta) is performed annually even to this day on the day of Ramanavami in the Bhadarachalam temple. The Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, as representative of the state, attends the event and presents pearls and silk garments to the deities. This is a ritual that the Qutub Shahi Sultan initiated and modern state government has continued to uphold this state 'tradition'. This could be seen as another example of the anomalies of the secular state in India as Chatterjee argues. See (Chatterjee 1998). But as Chatterjee demonstrates such anomalies force us to consider the contradictions of the liberal-secular state itself.

and interact with others. *Sri Ramadasu*, on the other hand introduces new mythological elements in the Ramadasu story to present to us a story where predestination and the divine power of Rama play an important role. As a result, a good part of the film is occupied by a dramatization of the Rama story; of the myth of the Sage Bhadra, which I discuss in the next section; and by a new mythical element that the film itself invents— Vishnu's descent to earth to supervise the Bhadrachalam temple construction. This invention allows the film to marginalize the presence of Islam and Muslim rule as insignificant episodes in a long history that connects Ramadasu to a classical and mythical Hindu past. This conflation of secular and mythical time is achieved through a variety of cinematic techniques, both visual and aural. I discuss these in the following sections.

As mentioned earlier, the tribal woman, Dammakka's spontaneous and irrational faith in Rama inspires Ramadasu's own awakening of faith. Once introduced to it, the *bhakti* seems to exert an irresistible force upon him. He finds himself lead physically into the world of the Ramayana story and desparately tries to warn the Ramayana characters of the impending kidnap of Sita by Ravana. This futile effort leaves him shaken. Long dolly shots that approach him from behind and from afar as he sits bewildered, and background music that marks this time as momentous build up a sense of trauma at the sudden but definite realization that there is no escaping Rama—the very elements of this land are permeated with his compelling presence. Ramadasu now sees the name of Rama everywhere—in the sky, on water, on every passing tree, in the landscape—in short upon everything around! This deliberate sacralizing of the empty homogeneous time-space of the nation is aimed at conflating the nation's past with that of a mythical Hindu past. As a

Rama bhakta, Ramadasu can not only enter the time and space of the Ramayana story but the God himself enters the profane space of Kaliyuga to oversee the construction of his temple and the welfare of his committed bhakta. Both God Rama and Ramadasu exist in a continuum that excludes all others as truly Others in space and time. Only those who have themselves recognized the importance of Rama now find true recognition as citizens. That is perhaps why the tribal woman as original inhabitant cannot but be a Rama devotee; and Kabir himself finds a place within the narrative only as an Ayodhya Rama bhakta.

Hearing 'Culture and Difference' in the Two Ramadasu Stories

Besides such obvious differences as the fact of one being in black and white and the later film being in color, there are many other aural and visual differences between the two films. In terms of cinematography, editing and set design too, the visual style of the two films varies a great deal. However, over the next few pages I will focus on the aural aspects of the films for two reasons. We have already discussed the importance of sound and the voice in Telugu cinema in the earlier chapter on NTR; in this chapter I focus on the general use of language and music rather than just the voice of the protagonist. As film theorists have pointed out, the techniques of sound editing and mixing make sound the bearer of a meaning. A second and related reason is the nature of circulation and consumption of Telugu cinema. As I have mentioned in the preceding chapter, the modes of consumption of Indian cinema in general have always been heterogeneous. The audio-tracks are consumed independently in the form of audio-tapes and CDs of songs and sometimes of dialogues as well.

Both the Ramadasu films use Telugu as the predominant language of dialogue between all characters. At first, this may not seem like a point worth making. Isn't the dialogue of all Telugu films in Telugu? However, this obvious aspect may not seem as obvious when we think about it a little bit more.[42] There have been many Telugu films depicting the life of non-Telugu characters but in the interests of intelligibility they are made to speak Telugu. The question of intelligibility works at two levels in film—at a basic and technical level it refers to the ability to distinguish sensible speech from all other sounds and noises. As Doane cited in the earlier chapter, points out film technicians give primary importance to the dialogue. By making the demand that a character, irrespective of its identity, speak the Telugu language, the Telugu film addresses the Telugu spectator and presents an illusion of communication across time and space—not just across the time and space that separates the making of the film and its viewing but also the communication across time and space that separates the contemporary viewer from the character and the world that is being re-presented (made present) on screen. However, realism demands that this "speech" be marked in different ways. The techniques that Telugu cinema resorts to most often are—In the case of a character from the past, a more classicized version of language is used. In the case of a foreign speaker, either the character's dialogue will be interspersed with phrases or sentences from her own language, or it could begin in a particular language and then shift to Telugu to enable audience comprehension of what is being uttered. Another technique that films often adopt is to make the characters speak with an exaggerated accent. Of course, even when

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[42] In fact, the first Tamil talkie (Kalidas, 1931), had songs in Telugu, while the dialogue was in Tamil. (Raghuram 1994)

supposedly native speakers of the language speak, markers of region, caste and class undeniably distinguish their speech from that of other characters. Indeed, it is one of the hallmarks of realism to match speech to the body of the person speaking. In the case of the non-native speaker these elements are further exaggerated or rather it works the other way round—it is this speech that marks her as non-native and foreign.[43]

Gopalacharyulu, the early 20th century playwright of *Bhakta Ramadasu* wrote dialogues in both Hindustani and Telugu for all the Muslim characters in the play. Depending on availability of actors who could speak Hindustani the dialogues could be delivered in either language.[44] Nagayya's *Bhakta Ramadasu* has dialogues in Telugu but nearly half of its songs are in Hindustani. Two songs performed at the court of the Sultan are in Hindustani. Throughout the film, the character Kabir sings the songs of the legendary Kabir written in the Hindavi language popular in the 15th century. Those songs are therefore, neither strictly in Hindi or Urdu as we understand them today. All the characters speak Telugu irrespective of their religious identity. However, both the Sultan and Kabir speak in chaste Telugu whenever they utter prose dialogue in the film; the common Muslims in the film, mostly employees in the Sultan's administration, speak in an exaggerated accented Telugu that usually marks the Muslim in most Telugu films.

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[43] Sometimes however, language can also be used to domesticate the foreign. For example, when a character is made to speak a certain language that is not hers, she does not simply translate what she would have said in her own language into Telugu. There is a whole new cultural world she has to inhabit and make her own. Raavi Kondala Rao in his essays on Telugu cinema recounts a rather interesting story about the pre-eminent screenwriter, Samudrala Raghavacharya who specialized in writing for mythological and historical films. Samudrala wrote the lyrics for the film, *Laila Majnu* (1949). In one of the songs, Laila, a Muslim young woman attributes her current misery at being separated from her lover, Majnu, to her incorrect performance of a *nomu*. *Nomu* is a word referring to a Hindu ritual activity usually performed by women seeking the fulfillment of some wish or desire. Kondala Rao asked Samudrala, "How can a Muslim girl talk about performing a *nomu*? To which Samudrala replied, "How can a (north Indian) Muslim girl talk Telugu?" See Kondala Rao's essay "Kanakatara tho Vyavahara Bhasha"in (Kondala Rao 2004) . 58-60.

[44] p. 184 in (Srikanta Sarma, Alanati Naatakalu 1995)

What effect is achieved through this particular mixture of languages? Can we read it merely as a realist device that seeks to accurately represent the multiplicity of language use in medieval South India? But there might be more to this. Nationalist re-workings of languages and identities in North India have resulted in a particular kind of ideological suturing of language, community and nation. Therefore, the popular slogan, "Hindi, Hindu and Hindustan" constructs a natural affinity between the language—Hindi, the religious identity—Hindu and the geographical territory, Hindustan. In this process, not only is the Muslim community identified with Urdu or "foreign" languages like Arabic or Persian but also is itself rendered "foreign". This is not to say that there have not been other attempts to propose alternative arrangements of language use and identity or that the everyday use of multiple languages or mixed languages in different spheres ceased to exist once such a "common sense" was set in place.[45] Rather it is to point to the multifarious implications such a discourse of language and community have upon discourses of nation and belonging, upon constructing categories of knowledge, and importantly the affective relationships it enables people to form and nurture. As Shahid Amin has remarked recently empirical facts and proper history seem unable to dislodge the popular imagination of Muslims as past rulers and as a single social group whose language is Urdu.

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[45] Indeed Hindi cinema itself presents a striking instance of an influential cultural sphere where the separation of Hindi and Urdu along community lines did not quite take root. The mixed language of Hindustani (a mix of Hindi and Urdu) persists to date. For an interesting discussion of the impact of colonial knowledge and the politics of language see, (Lelyveld, Colonial Knowledge and the Fate of Hindustani 1993). For a related discussion of this politics played out in the context of language use in the national public radio in India, see his essay, (Lelyveld, Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All-India Radio 1994)

In the first instance, it appears as though *Bhakta Ramadasu* disrupts the supposed natural affiliation between language and identity by its use of different languages—by creating a literally polyphonic text. This particular use of language seems to achieve the effect of placing Ramadasu and his songs firmly in contemporary 17th century where both Hindustani and Telugu were in circulation and were being used for poetic, literary composition as well as in administrative and everyday contexts. However, this is also the story of Ramadasu as it is being presented in 1964 for a Telugu audience. As such, following the arguments made earlier in this chapter, it is possible to read it as reinforcing the secular nationalist discourse whereby Hindi or a more mixed Hindustani by virtue of being a national language finds a seamless and effortless place in this version of the past. Kabir is not only a 15th century weaver and rebel poet or even a 17th century fakir, he is also an icon of Hindu-Muslim unity in the 20th century who will be called upon to perform the task of promoting communal harmony and secular toleration between different communities in the present moment. It is also a fact of no less significance that Mohammed Rafi, the eminent playback singer of Hindi cinema and a Muslim who had distinguished himself for his soulful and effortless renderings of Hindu bhajans and Hindustani classical music in films, is the voice that sings the Kabir bhajans in this film.[46]

But why is the song chosen for a representation of linguistic diversity? What is the nature of the song as a narrative device in Indian cinema? What kind of position does it occupy in the filmic narrative—is it diegetic or extra-diegetic? It is indeed a cliché now to state that Indian films are full of songs—they have either been celebrated as a feature unique to Indian cinema or been denounced as standing in the way of a genuine realist aesthetic. In

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[46] For a discussion of the syncretism that characterizes North Indian classical and popular musical culture, including film music, see (Manuel 1996)

either case, their popularity is undeniable. The film song is a device that is used to convey heightened sentiments and emotions. As stated earlier, songs have a significant after-life beyond the boundaries of the filmic text. They are consumed independently through the radio, cassettes and CDs. It is also not uncommon for the lyrics of songs to provide highly poetic or sometimes allegorical comment on the narrative. The songs not only supplement the narrative but also frame its meanings in significant ways. At the same time, it is also the space where there is greater artistic license and formal dramatic conventions of the three unities of time, space and emotion can be flouted freely. In this sense, it is possible to have Hindustani lyrics for the songs, even though literal comprehension by the spectators is not a guarantee. The condition of intelligibility in this particular case is fulfilled on other grounds—by attributing Hindustani songs to the Muslim fakir and to songs sung in the Sultan's court, the film proclaims the "difference" (if not "otherness") of the Muslim fakir and the sultan but frames it within a narrative of more or less harmonious co-existence that is made possible by the secular tolerance of a just ruler.

However, *Bhakta Ramadasu* too, despite its "good intentions", or precisely because its good intentions are drawn from an idea of liberal secular tolerance, cannot imagine other ways of living together and of narrativizing the past. The fakir and the Sultan seem to be only addressing their Hindu subjects and followers. There are no Muslim followers of the fakir, no recent converts to Islam! The Muslim fakir is one who voluntarily enters the space of Hindu religious devotionalism and there is hardly space for representing genuine conflict or religious difference per se.

Sri Ramadasu too mobilizes a range of aural allusions but to completely different ends. In its efforts to construct a suitable Hindu mythology that will support its representation of Ramadasu as an ethical devotee-citizen under Muslim rule. Two examples will suffice to demonstrate how this is achieved. The background song that opens the film begins with opening lines of the popular Ramadasu *kirtana*, "*Adigo Bhadradri, Gautami Idigo Chudandi*" (Look! Here is the Bhadra mountain and there is the river Gautami). But the rest of the song, we soon realize is a new one written for the film by lyricist, Veturi Sundararama Murthy. The original Ramdasu *kirtana* indicates the geographical coordinates of the place where he has built his temple and where his deity Rama is enshrined. It describes the temple and its deity in loving detail. The film song echoes this *kirtana* but alters it thus—"*Adigo, Adigo Bhadragiri! Andhra jatikidi Ayodhyapuri*" (Look ! There is the Bhadra Mountain! It is the Ayodhya of the Andhra race/nation). What we see here is a reorientation of the geography of Bhadrachalam, whereby its identity is now aligned with that of Ayodhya in north India. It is no longer a sacred site in its own right by virtue of being the Bhadrachala Rama temple built by the great devotee, Ramadasu. Rather, it now becomes a representative of, or rather a substitute for, the original temple at Ayodhya. Its function is to point to that other temple and declare its affinity with it. There is now a strident connection, supported by an equally strident background score, that is asserted between the two temples at the very start of the film and we will continue to see the way in which this association is exploited right through the film.

A second example is the song, "*Anta Ramamayam*" (Rama Pervades Everything), again a well-known *kirtana* by Ramadasu himself. This song which depicts the conversion of Ramadasu to true Rama bhakti as he realizes the omnipresence and omnipotence of God, is interrupted by a scene that dramatizes the descent of God Vishnu to earth, in order to oversee and aid Ramadasu in the construction of the temple at Bhadrachalam. The effect of this particular scene is amplified by the use of a poetic verse from the famous 15th century classical text, Potana's *Mahabhagavatamu* that is believed to be "a landmark text in the evolution of Andhra Vaisnava religion (Narayana Rao and Shulman 2002, 200)" The verse is extremely popular, even children studying the Telugu language learn it at school. It narrates the well-known episode of the *Gajendra Moksham* in which Vishnu is portrayed as having rushed instantly from his heavenly abode upon hearing the cries of his devotee, Gajendra, an elephant who is fighting a losing battle with a crocodile. The god rushes to his devotee's rescue totally unprepared and paying no heed to the train that follows him bewildered—his wives, his vehicle, his weapons, and everyone else in *Vaikuntam*.[47] This aural allusion heightens the effect of Vishnu descending to earth to help Ramadasu and lends an aura of extreme urgency and divine design to the building of the temple.

Performing the Devotee as Ethical and Political Citizen-Subject

By the time he did the role of the Ramadasu, Nagayya had already acquired a formidable reputation as an accomplished actor who specialized in playing the role of a devotee. His

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[47] See chapter on "Bammera Potana" for a brief introduction to Potana and his *Bhagavatamu* and for a translation of the sections of *Gajendra Moksham* episode in (Narayana Rao and Shulman 2002, 200-215). For a more detailed analysis of this episode, see (Shulman 1993)

famous saint trilogy of the forties where he played the roles of the 15th century saint-poet, Potana; the 18th century saint-composer, Tyagayya and the 17th century poet-philosopher, Vemana have cemented his position as a prime screen *bhakta*. In *Bhakta Ramadasu* too he uses his slow gait, gentle demeanour and his singing prowess to portray a conflicted devotee. Nagayya's portrayal of Ramadasu is a psychological one which depicts the individual's movement along the path of bhakti. During his imprisonment for 12 long years, Nagayya portrays the devotee moving through various stages—from complete faith to waning hope and skepticism regarding God's commitment to his devotees, from anger at his state of utter helplessness to utter despair and from resignation to a reawakening of hope.

Released in March 2006, *Sri Ramadasu* had a cast and crew that included some of the biggest names in the Telugu film industry—Nagarjuna, a top star played the lead role, the film was directed by K. Raghavendra Rao, an extremely successful commercial director with more than hundred films to his credit; a highly rated music director, Keeravani; and a successful writer of historical devotionals, J.K. Bharavi. Above all, this was a team that had produced the highly successful historical-devotional film of 1997, *Annamayya.* So there were very high expectations and huge media hype around this film.

As many film theorists have argued, the film star is an exceptional individual. The persona of the star is always in excess of the character that he plays on screen. By virtue of this he carries a double representational burden. He not only represent a character in a story but also represents the interests of the commoners within the film and by extension that of the audience as well, in the sense of being their agent. Nagayya was no "hero" in

the way in which Nagarjuna is. *Sri Ramadasu* has almost all the features of a contemporary hero-centred Telugu film —romantic song sequences, mandatory comic scenes and even a fight sequence. Each scene is short and its main aim is to establish or reinforce the heroism of the protagonist; he is indeed predestined to be what he will later become. This is perhaps why the new film is not *Bhakta Ramadasu* but *Sri Ramadasu*! The word, *bhakta* (devotee) has been replaced by the honorific prefix, *Sri*. The devotee himself is actually now responsible for protecting the God. Indeed, Nagarjuna as Ramadasu is introduced in the film as one who saves an idol of the God from falling to the ground as it is being taken around in a ceremonial procession.

In contrast to Nagayya's middle-aged and respectable rounded figure, Nagarjuna's muscular and fit body is presented as a spectacle in the film. He is definitely a hero of the nineties. Furthermore, Nagarjuna's Ramadasu is a strident anti-establishment figure. He demonstrates his forthrightness and courage and his concern for the common people when he first meets the Golconda Sultan. Impressed, the Sultan appoints him tahsildar of Husnabad. He proves himself an able and untiring administrator whose only concern is the welfare of the poor. Unlike Nagayya in the earlier film, here the character suffers no bereavement or self-doubt. As an administrator he is shown opposing feudalism and freeing people from the oppressive *dora* (feudal landlord). He promises to provide them with legal entitlements for the land they till. The narrative function of this scene, common to many Telugu films, is to establish the protagonist as a moral and ethical subject and one who can represent the interests of the people. However, once the turn to bhakti happens, this socialist agenda is soon forgotten and abandoned.

Instead the priority shifts to the construction of the temple which now acquires urgency and inspires a passionate commitment among the people and galvanizes them into a community with a mission. The people, until then pictured as passive victims of feudalism, are now moved to sing and dance and actually donate money and jewellery to the holy cause of temple construction. Much later in the film, when the temple is built and the Sultan has arrested him for appropriating the state's revenues for temple construction, Ramadasu launches a powerful rhetoric about the perfection of Rama as a God and warns the Sultan about the inevitability of Rama temples being built in each and every village. He also chides the Sultan for having used the people's money for the aggrandizement of the Qutub Shahis by building various forts and palaces—Golconda fort and Charminar included. We hardly need to emphasize that this new militant style of putting Muslim rulers in their place and the rhetoric that seeks to secure the cultural rights of the Hindu majority (pictured as suffering from minority-appeasement policies!) owes much to the Hindutva discourse of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar.

As we have seen earlier, Nagayya's portrayal of Ramadasu is a psychological one. In the new film, however, the graphic portrayal of the brutality inflicted upon Ramadasu by the prison guards only serves to underscore the oppressiveness of Muslim rule. Alongside this representation of Ramadasu as heroic figure the film's publicity campaign positioned the film's spectators as devotees. While all devotional films seek to do this at various levels, Ramadasu's campaign was unique in many ways. I discuss these at length in a subsequent chapter on film publicity and specatorship practices.

In the preceding sections, I have tried to show how both a seemingly liberal-secular film like *Bhakta Ramadasu* and more militantly Hindu nationalist film like *Sri Ramadasu* are both unable to imagine Islam or Muslim outside the framework of a minority status. I have tried to demonstrate the specific cinematic modes and techniques that are employed to elaborate and structure their narratives. I began this chapter with an argument about the the need to rethink and refashion the terms, minority and majority and their relation to the nation. But given the particular ways in which Telugu popular cinema seems to craft narratives of the nation's past and present, it is difficult to find examples of possibilities for such a refashioning. While the ethical demand of a truly liberal secularism would be to transcend particular affiliations of race, gender, religion and language, in reality this has seldom materialized either in the West or in countries like India. Instead, what we have are particular identities masquerading as universal and thereby becoming hegemonic. While Telugu cinema does not at the moment offer any evidence of a new thinking, I discuss one recent strand of contemporary Telugu literature in the final chapter as an example of an effort to refashion the terms of majority and minority. In the following chapter, however, I examine how the minor genre of the goddess films disrupts the logic of the majoritarian conception of the Hindus and Hindu history as Indian history. It also introduces the crucial question of gender in the conception of the citizen-devotee.

Chapter Three

<u>The Good Wife and the Goddess: Scripting Roles for the Female Citizen in the Devotional Film</u>

Chapter 1 focussed on the film and political career of NTR to discuss the ways in which the mythological film was central to the emergence of the male star into the position of a populist leader, one who appears capable of representing the interests of the Telugu people. As I argued there the mythological and the socio-fantasy genres aided the re-imagination of the Telugu social centred on a male star that emerges both as the embodiment of Telugu tradition as well as the pre-eminent modern citizen-subject. Pursuing a parallel but different line of inquiry, Chapter 2 provided an account of the manner in which the Telugu nationalist politics of NTR is superseded by newer political configurations. It discussed how cinema mobilizes popular male devotee-saint figures from the past to perform the role of citizen-devotees within new nationalist and majoritarian scripts. It also delineated the processes through which a majoritarian Hindu identity is secured by positing it against a minority Muslim identity. In this instance, the Telugu nationalist identity is not posed against the North Indian one; rather it is shown to be continuous with a Hindu identity and therefore opposed to an Urdu/Muslim identity.

This chapter explores yet another genealogical strand of the cinema-religion-politics intersections in Telugu cinema through examining a sub-genre of devotional films that were centred on goddesses and women as *satis* (ideal wives) and as exemplary devotees. It should come as no surprise that when one considers the roles scripted for women as devotees and citizens, not only does a different story emerge but it is also a story that is

fraught with the many contradictory tensions that caste and gender introduce into narratives of communities forged on the basis of majoritarian conceptions of Telugu language and Hindu religion. Interestingly enough the neither can the woman as *sati* nor can the goddess, especially in her lower caste manifestations, emerge as representative figures of language or religious communities in their own right. In fact, they challenge the certainties of such communities by constantly blurring their boundaries. Therefore, on the one hand, in the decades of the 50s and the 60s these films thematize the tensions and contradictions between the woman as goddess and as a *sati*, an ideal wife. Further, not only lower caste devotees but lower caste goddesses too are repeatedly made the objects of reform in these films rendering homogenous conceptions of the Hindu tradition problematic. On the other hand, the 'Teluguness' of these genres is not as pronounced or emphasized as it is in the mythologicals. There is a more fluid exchange between Tamil and Telugu cinema in these genres that becomes more pronounced in the post-seventies period of the goddess films. In the 80s and 90s a new genre of subaltern goddess films emerges to rework these older configurations of caste and gendered power and religiosity.

The nationalist construction of the ideal of upper-caste womanhood in the Indian context was forged in opposition to the Western woman and the lower caste woman—both of whom were figured as aggressive and sexually promiscuous. Further this figure was assigned the responsibility of upholding tradition and was designated the keeper of spiritual and moral conscience of the nation (Sangari and Vaid 1990). In the first part of this chapter, I examine the ways in which the contradictions that traverse this nationalist ideal manifest themselves in the cinema of the 1950s and 60s in the form of a conflict between two figures which have been central to the Telugu devotional genre—the *sati*

and *sakti*—the good wife and the goddess. During this period a number of *sati* films were made—*Sati Savitri* (1953), *Sati Anasuya* (1957), *Sati Sakku Bai* (1965) and *Sati Sumathi* (1967). It is a well-known fact that these Hindu mythic characters of ideal wives provided the role models for imagining the ethics of good wifehood and in their secularized form determined the script for women's roles in popular cinema of all genres. The female saints who had defied the norms of wifehood and domesticity to pursue a path of religious devotion like Akka Mahadevi, Avviayar and Meerabai have been the exceptions amidst the more normalized and normative stories of ideal wives, *satis* like Savitri, Sumathi and Anasuya. In many of these films the goddess in her fierce and terrifying aspects, whose worship is usually associated with the superstitious lower castes, is dismissed as a sign of primitive nature. The goddess herself is therefore seen to be in need of reform and containment. In later decades, however, there is a perceptible shift in the relationship between the ideal wife and the goddess. No longer pitted against each other, they are figured more as allies despite the overall patriarchal logic that governs the narratives. Thus, the fierce lower caste goddess who was the subject of reform in the first two decades after independence moved centre-stage in a series of fairly popular low-budget Tamil and Telugu women's melodramas in the '70s and '80s. In the 1990s this subaltern goddess made a brief but spectacular bid for mainstream success.

This shift in the representation of the goddess is accompanied by a shift in the generic nature of the devotional film too. From being in the mode of the standard women's melodrama where the emotion of tragedy was predominant, the *bhakti* film of the '90s begins to display, in addition, features of the horror film. In the latter part of the chapter, I speculate on the reasons for these thematic and generic shifts and argue that the question

of caste is crucial to this shift. Liberal secularism in modern India was premised on the desire to create national citizens who transcend caste and religious identities. The parallel project of Hindu nationalism too had to erase caste in order to preserve Hinduism as a separate and homogeneous identity. Caste was indeed the horrifying abjection that needed to be marked, cordoned off and exorcised or alternatively co-opted in order for the Hindu patriarchal social order to be preserved. Recent work by Kalpana Ram examines the new goddess film genre in Tamil and makes some very interesting observations (Ram 2008). However, I disagree with Ram's argument about the subaltern nature of these films and argue that we need to pay closer attention to the ways in which cinematic technology not just reinforces but transforms older myths and traditional modes of relating to the divine and the supernatural.

The Normative Indian Citizen-Subject

Various developments that began in the '70s reached a new boiling point in the '90s and allowed for a critical unpacking of the liberal citizen-self that was normalized and made normative in the first few decades of politics in independent India. As Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana have remarked in an important essay,

> The shaping of the normative human-Indian subject involved, on the one
> hand, a dialectical relationship of inequality and opposition with the classical
> subject of western liberalism, and on the other hand, its coding as upper-caste,
> middle-class, Hindu and male. The coding was effected by processes of
> othering/differentiation such as, for example, the definition of upper-
> caste/class female respectability in counterpoint to lower-caste licentiousness,
> or Hindu tolerance to Muslim fanaticism as well as by a gradual and sustained
> transformation of the institutions that govern everyday life. Elaborated and
> consolidated through a series of conflicts, this coding became invisible as this

> citizen-self was redesignated as modern, secular and democratic. (Tharu and Niranjana 1994, 96)

The years that followed the social unrest in the years of the 1975 Emergency—the growth of militant Left struggles, the popular women's movement, rise of the backward castes to political power and the struggles led by various dalit groups across the country—all these have in sum precipitated the break-up of the secular consensus around the questions of gender, caste and minority issues and have led to a crisis in Indian secularism. There exists now a rich body of scholarship that reflects on the contemporary impasses faced by Indian feminism where it is no longer possible to conceive of the subject of feminism in the singular. The host of difficult questions thrown up by the intersections of caste, religious community and gender have revealed the complex imbrications of these different axes of power and powerlessness.[1]

Therefore, the Indian upper-caste woman of the nineties was undoubtedly an agential figure fighting for her rights as citizen whether she was an activist in the anti-Mandal agitations or a vociferous member of the Hindu right. However, this agency aligned her with majoritarian and anti-lower caste politics of the Hindutva or anti-Mandal kind even as it pitted her against the interests of lower caste and Muslim women. Niranjana's insightful analysis of popular mainstream cinema in the nineties asserts that "In this negotiation of the new modernity, the woman is not presented as just a passive counter; rather, her agency is shown as crucial for the shifts that are taking place." She concludes her analysis of the director, Maniratnam's films, saying:

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[1] See especially (Menon 1998), (Tharu and Niranjana 1994), (Niranjana 2000), (S. Tharu 1998) and (John 2000).

> The centrality of romantic love in these films can reveal for feminism the gendering of the new 'Indian' as well as the complicity of 'women' in producing the exclusions of caste and community which enable the formation of the citizen-subject. A rethinking of feminist politics provoked by the questions raised by films like Maniratnam's may well have to proceed from a rethinking of those structuring terms of our daily experiences as well as our politics: nationalism, humanism and secularism. (Niranjana 2000)

This new thinking in relation to the normative citizen-subject and more particularly the re-configurations of the subject of feminism throw up a host of questions that are relevant to the particular genre of films that I have chosen to examine. I argue that the devotional film as much as the mythological represents a struggle over the *casted* female subject's citizenship in the nation and by extension a struggle over the form of the social itself. However, the filmic manifestations and explorations of these crises offer us no neat resolutions. Rather they map the ongoing struggles; they are particular attempts at addressing current impasses and re-articulations.

Does the Goddess have a Caste?

The goddess occupies a liminal space in the Hindu tradition—she stands at the threshold of Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic traditions, Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions (Chakrabarti 2001). She is loved and revered in some forms, feared and respected in some other forms and even reviled in yet others. Although to say that 'she' is to be found in different forms is to already assume a basic unity among goddesses and a single originary great goddess of whose forms there are many. Indeed there is considerable disagreement regarding whether all the goddesses are one or whether a distinction can be made between the brahmanical female deities like Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati

and the village goddesses in different parts of the country who are only locally known

and worshipped.

Gayatri Spivak has recently argued that it is the nature of Indic polytheism that every

goddess is the great goddess when invoked in worship (Spivak 2001). Cynthia Hulmes'

work contrasts two goddess- centred texts, the *Devi Mahatmyam* (6th CE) and the *Devi*

Bhagavatam (9th CE) to demonstrate many significant differences in the way the goddess

and female power in general is conceived in these different time periods. (Humes 2002).

In his history of the goddess-centred tradition in Bengal, Kunal Chakrabarti describes the

ideological role played by the Bengal *Puranas* in the assimilation of the goddess worship

into the dominant religious practice of the time. He argues that the Bengal Puranas which

were composed mainly in the period between the 7th and the 12th centuries set in motion a

process whereby the goddess cult by all accounts a pre-Vedic, non-Aryan phenomenon

was gradually assimilated into Brahmanism. He also notes that certain *tantric* practices

which were also goddess-centred were also incorporated into Brahmanical rituals. As

Vedic Brahmanism sought to increase its base by taking in *sudras* and women into its

fold, it introduced the *puja* and *vrata*, both simplified ritual practices that did not require

the rigours of the Vedic sacrificial performances. As Chakrabarti puts it,

> The Bengal *Puranas* were intended to be the vehicles of a popular and broad-
> based religion, hence, they relaxed some of the social codes of orthodox
> Brahmanism. They allowed *sudras* to listen to the *Puranas* and admitted right
> of women to participate in the mainstream religious activities such as the
> performance of the *vratas*. For this purpose they imbibed elements of local
> cultures, and the influence of the *Tantras* helped them to reach out
> particularly to women and the lower *varnas*. (Chakrabarti 2001)

Of course, as Chakrabarti himself notes, there were limits to this assimilation and

incorporation. The *vamacara* tradition of Tantric practice was strictly non-admissible and

was condemned in no uncertain terms. Another significant point that Chakrabarti makes is the importance of the *vrata* for women in particular. Indeed even today the *vrata* is the main ritual activity that organizes the upper-caste woman's religious and social life in modern India and increasingly we find this to be the case for the lower-caste women too. This is why, as we will see later, the *vrata* takes on enormous significance in the goddess films.

More contemporary studies too point to the wide gap that separates the older brahmanical or brahmanized mythologies of goddesses from the more local non-Brahmin caste goddesses. Kancha Illaiah, a dalit writer and critic argues for a sharper distinction and demarcation between the brahmanical and dalit-bahujan goddesses. Indeed, he would view any attempt to co-opt local goddesses into the great Devi tradition as yet another attempt at establishing the hegemony of brahmanical thought. (Ilaiah (1996) 2005)

Focussing on aspects of women's religiosity, both Kalpana Ram in her study of possession among rural Tamil women and V. Vasanta Lakshmi in an unpublished paper on goddess cults in Andhra Pradesh, point out that several of the lower-caste goddess cults in villages exhibit a sort of continuum between woman and goddess (Ram 2001); (Vasantalakshmi 1999). In rural South India there are several local legends about women (mostly belonging to *sudra* or intermediary castes) who were deified as goddesses after their death. As Vasantalakshmi points out, at least half of these stories describe a conflict involving the control over the woman's sexuality. Many of these are about women who died after an actual or attempted rape, or due to sexual harassment of some kind, due to premarital pregnancy, or following accusations of extra marital pregnancy. Interestingly,

this deification of women is not solely a Hindu phenomenon but Vasantalakshmi says

that she has found at least ten durgahs dedicated to Muslim women.

In her study, Kalpana Ram argues that in the case of the village mother goddesses the

bhakti mode alone cannot adequately represent the nature of the goddess and the

relationship between her and the devotees. She argues,

> Bhakti is often made to stand, particularly in the current political context of mobilizations against Hindutva, for the entirety of subaltern religion. The religious cults devoted to goddesses such as Icakki and Muttumari depend centrally, not on expressions of love by the goddess, but on direct possession of their devotees. Unlike Sanskritic deities these goddesses are not characterized by any clear distinction, let alone a polarity, between auspicious power and demonic power. Rather, they represent a view of power as amoral, as efficacy incarnate (Ram 2001, 210).

But it was to take many years before these non-Sanskritic, subaltern goddesses could

make their appearance on the Telugu screen without being made the object of reform, but

simply as powerful goddesses who are feared and revered. Therefore, let me know turn to

cinema once again to give an account of the career of the goddess on the Telugu screen.

The Screen Career of the Goddess

In *Patala Bhairavi* (1951), a classic folklore film in Telugu, the film's plot revolves

around the domestication of the eponymous fierce and blood-thirsty folk goddess.[2] The

hero's courage and adventurous nature help in transforming her into a benign human-

sized goddess who is at the beck and call of anyone who possesses the little figurine that

represents and controls her. In one of the most spectacular scenes of the film, amidst the

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[2] See (S. Srinivas 2009)

ruins of the giant goddess statue destroyed by the "hero" of the film, she appears as the puny malleable goddess who is bound to appear and appease anyone who controls her figurine. The goddess who is the object of dread and fascination in the beginning of the film is transformed into a comical automaton. There are many humorous instances where she appears even when she is beckoned by mistake and mechanically produces the words, "*Manava! emi nee korika*" (O Human! what is your wish?)

In the historical film, *Tenali Ramakrishna* (1957), based on the history of the famous Vijayanagara kingdom of medieval Southern India, the poet Ramakrishna chances upon a gathering of lower-class, lower-caste devotees. They are on their way to worshipping the goddess. They are seen carrying offerings of goats and fowl because they believe that the goddess needs to be appeased through these sacrifices. The poet is horrified by these crude superstitions. He dissuades the group from performing these bloody and abominable sacrifices and argues that the goddess who is like a mother to all would never seek such offerings and if indeed she does seek them, then, she is not a true goddess![3] Having sent the worshippers away, he proceeds to berate and admonish the goddess for her mistaken ways and pleads with her to appear before him in a benign form. The goddess obliges him and grants him a boon to choose to drink from one of the two cups offered to him. One would grant him riches and the other wisdom. True to his nature and reputation as a trickster-poet (*vikata kavi*), he fools the goddess and drinks up from both the cups. Thus, the goddess is not only reformed by the poet, but also outwitted by him.

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[3] S.V. Srinivas shows how reform of the lower castes through dissuading them from consuming alcohol and abstaining from animal sacrifices as part of their worship are classic reformist moves during the nationalist phase. (S. Srinivas 1999). As we will see in the last chapter, the practice of 'animal

Reforming the Goddess and Revering the Sati

The most interesting articulation of the conflict between a reformist ideology that discourages goddess worship and the popularity of such worship among the people can be found in the mythological film *Nagula Chavithi* (1956) which was produced by the well-known South Indian film studio, AVM Productions. The reforming zeal of a ruler who is a devout Shiva *bhakta* comes into conflict with the general populace that worships the goddess Manasa Devi. Even today Manasa Devi is worshipped by people in many parts of the country as a snake goddess. The popular legends about her describe her as Shiva's *manasaputri*—one born out of Siva's mind or his imagination. In the film, however, the king believes that Manasa is a violent and vengeful goddess. He repeatedly refers to her as a *neecha kshudra devata*.[4] The film raises many interesting questions about belief and toleration. Should the ruler tolerate some practices simply because they are popular? Should he not exercise his sovereignty to ban them and reform his subjects?

The narrative is fraught with the tension of proving the divinity of Siva, the king's unshakeable *bhakti* towards Siva as well as the divinity of the folk deity/snake goddess, Manasa. The film opens with the *agent provocateur* Narada, the sage who constantly tours the worlds of the gods, demons and men, paying a visit to Manasa in her under-water world of snakes. He instigates in her a desire to be worshipped and revered in the

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Sacrifice' remains a contentious issue even today.

[4] In an essay on the popular children's' comic book series, Amar Chitra Katha's depiction of gods and saints, the religious studies scholar, John Hawley remarks that Anant Pai, its founder-editor, did not want to do an issue on the goddess, Manasa Devi, despite her popularity among many Indians, because of her violent, vengeful nature. Hawley's essay provides an interesting account of the ways in which Amar Chitra Katha produces a Hinduism that is sanitized and in-keeping with a nationalist Vedantic view of the religion (Hawley 2005).

same way as Siva and his wife, Parvati and their children, Vinayaka and Karthikeya are. He identifies the king as a true Siva *bhakta* and tells Manasa that should she succeed in converting him into her devotee, her popularity among his subjects would be cemented. As the film progresses, Manasa's desire to make the king accept her divinity becomes stronger and she is willing to inflict terrible suffering upon him and his kingdom in order to force him into submission. She kills all his sons, destroys his family and also creates a famine in his land. This leads to an insurrection of sorts by the people who seek to force the king to submit to her power. A democratic demand is made by the people that the ruler ought to respect their belief in the goddess, acquiesce to her power and join them in her worship. But the king is stubborn in his resolve not to accept her. The narrative seems to be caught in an irresolvable impasse. Should the king submit to the demand of his people? Would that not mean that vengeful goddesses can blackmail people into worshipping them? To overcome this seemingly insurmountable narrative crisis, the film introduces a third character—that of the *sati*. The conflict between the king and the goddess over sovereign power is now transformed into a struggle between the *sati* and the *sakti*, between an ideal wife and a powerful but malevolent goddess—two aspects of the Woman herself.

The film dramatizes the conflict between the liberal reformist impulse of the ruler and the demands of popular sovereignty. But the conflict is resolved in favour of the ruler and reform, as the beliefs of the people are proved to be "superstitions" since they are not true beliefs, but falsehoods that have been induced by Manasa's *maya*. Repeated machinations of Manasa to foil and disrupt the true *bhakti* of the Saivite king and his daughter-in-law Vipula move the narrative forward. Manasa's gradual descent into malevolence and

vengefulness leads to a depletion of her powers. Her fall from divinity is paralleled in the film by the rise of Vipula to the status of a *sati*. When Manasa kills Vipula's husband on their wedding night, the latter resolves to bring him back to life by undertaking a pilgrimage with her husband's dead body. This exemplary and unfailing devotion to her husband helps Vipula Devi acquire god-defying powers. She is actually able to stall Time by preventing the sun-rise in order to prevent the decay of her husband's body. Manasa and other gods are forced to submit to her superior power and to restore her husband's life. In all this, Manasa comes across as a scheming, unprincipled and ruthless power-mongering goddess who needs to realize that true devotion cannot be secured through fear or favour and therefore she has to reform herself before she can be declared fit for worship.

Thus, having raised the difficult questions of belief and toleration, and the legitimacy of reform, the film's narrative resolution chooses to reform popular belief through reforming the object of that belief, the goddess herself. A concession to popular belief (and popular sovereignty) is made but only after the film demonstrates that the people are vulnerable not only to the threats of violence but also manipulation by unscrupulous gods and goddesses.

Far less dramatic but far more representative depictions of the contestation between *sati* and *sakti* can be seen in the devotional films *Sati Anasuya* (1956) and *Bhukailas* (1957*)* too. In *Sati Anasuya*, the goddesses—Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, wives of the Hindu trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva respectively, grow jealous of the miraculous powers acquired by Anasuya, the devoted wife of the Sage Athree. With the instigation of Narada, they resolve to prove that she is after all an ordinary mortal and they, the

goddesses, are more powerful than her. They put her through a series of difficult tests but Anasuya emerges successful in all of them. Her god-defying powers are the result of her unwavering and unerring practice of devoted *patiseva*, service to the husband as supreme god.

In *Bhukailas*, the god Siva faces a real predicament when at the end of a long and rigorous penance, his devotee Ravana asks for a strange boon.[5] Taking advantage of Siva's reputation as the devotee-friendly god who never goes back on his word of promise, Ravana asks that Siva give away his wife, Parvati to him. True to his reputation, Siva obliges him! Left to her own devices, Parvati, the good wife of Siva, is compelled to bring forth her other self, the all-powerful, great Goddess Maha Maya in order to rescue herself from Ravana. Through this episode the film, *Bhukailas* underscores Ravana's self-destructive propensity for desiring the undesirable, namely the Mother. Later on, as we know from the *Ramayana*, he will desire another mother-figure Sita and this desire ensures his doom. Interestingly enough, Parvati serves as the object of exchange in order to prevent the far more threatening transfer of Siva's divine powers. His *atmalingam* (soul force) was the original object of Ravana's penance. Having promised his mother, that he would secure the *atmalingam*, on the completion of his penance, Ravana momentarily loses his memory and desires Parvati instead of the *atmalingam*. Viewed in the context of the Dravidian appropriation of Ravana as learned scholar and a Dravidian king, the film lends itself to a reading wherein Ravana and his mother of the inferior Dravidian race are seen to be unfit to partake of sovereign power.

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[5] Ravana, the mythical king of Lanka is the famous antagonist of the epic *Ramayana*. This film narrates his pre-history as it were and also presents him in a new light, as a scholar and devout Siva *bhakta* with the only fatal flaw of desiring women he ought not to.

As Narada solemnly proclaims to the audience, Siva and Vishnu are the same, their devotees should not view each other as enemies. Implicit in this frontal exhortation to the audience, is the advice that in the post-independence context, they should recognize themselves as having only one identity, that of being Hindus—not Vaishnavites and Shaivites or Aryans and Dravidians! The goddess in *Bhukailas* is powerful and vulnerable by turns. Her main function is to ensure that the sovereignty of the male gods, Siva and Vishnu is secured and preserved from Ravana's attempts to seize it while she herself has to resort to deception and subterfuge in order to escape from the latter's clutches.

Marathi Sant Sakhu vs. the Telugu Sakkubai

The last example I shall discuss in this section is from the film, *Sati Sakkubai* to illustrate Telugu cinema's reluctance in this period to envisage a woman's religiosity outside or along with the demands of domestic responsibilities. The *sati* can only be devoted to her husband. Devotion to the goddess or a male deity is often incompatible with devotion to the husband. A *pativrata* or devout wife cannot be a spiritual seeker in her own right. That is the reason why the Marathi film of the 1940s calls itself *Sant Sakhu* (Saint Sakhu). But in the Telugu version of the film produced a couple of decades, Sant Sakhu is transformed into a *sati*, not a saint in her own right but a wife! The Telugu film is named *Sati Sakkubai*.

Produced by Prabhat Studios famous for their *sant* genre, *Sant Sakhu* (Damle-Fattelal 1942) is a remarkable film for more reasons than one. Not only is it the rare story of a

female saint, it is also one in which the woman's bhakti is not subordinated to the demands of conjugality and domesticity. The film begins with the couple, Sakhu and her husband, engaged in worship of the god, but also in exchanging loving glances at each other forming a seemingly unproblematic love triangle. The frontal presentation of the god is complemented by shots of the couple. It is with the entry of the oppressive mother-in-law that the extended family and society encroach upon the space of the couple which seemed until then to be the very epitome of a companionate marriage, united as they are by their shared devotion to the deity.

Later in the film Sakhu is thrown out of the house by her mother-in-law whose oppression increases gradually as the narrative progresses. In her distress Sakhu is drawn to the song of a band of pilgrims on their way to Pandharpur. In a remarkable track-in shot we see Sakhu as she determinedly strides away from home to follow the strains of a song praising the god of Pandharpur. The camera follows her with alternating mid-shots of her walking legs and determined face. At the end of this shot we see her ecstatically join the singers. However, hearing of this through her neighbours, Sakhu's mother-in-law reaches the spot and drags her home forcibly where she ties her up to a pillar. The god, Panduranga, appears and releases Sakhu and magically transports her to the altar of the Pandharpur temple while he takes her place at the pillar. On reaching Pandharpur, Sakhu has *darsan* of the Lord and dies at his feet having fulfilled her life's ambition. But the god once again rescues her and brings her back to life. But he continues to occupy her place at home, physically performing all the domestic labour assigned to Sakhu cheerfully. In a memorable song from the film, slow dissolves reveal that *this* Sakhu at work—pounding the grains, sweeping the floor, drawing water from the well, cleaning

and decorating the courtyard, cooking and tending to her child, husband and mother-in-law, is actually God himself come to take his devotee's place. There are alternating dissolves of the God and of Sakhu which reveal this Sakhu's true identity to the audience.

The Telugu film version of the Sakku story, however, provides an interesting contrast to the Marathi version. While the Prabhat Sakku suffers no conflict between her devotion to her husband and to the god of Pandharpur, the Telugu Sakku Bai seems to completely neglect her husband and his desires due to her immersion in bhakti. Panduranga *bhakti* and *patibhakti* (devotion to husband) seem incompatible here. Further unlike the Panduranga of Pandharpur who himself takes the place of Sakkubai and performs all the household chores, the Telugu god uses his magic to accomplish all these tasks. It seems as if he cannot be seen to perform feminine menial household chores! On the contrary, in his disguise as Sakkubai, he provides the occasion for a comic and romantic song with Sakku's husband who is both shocked and delighted to see his wife's new erotic avatar. The film also introduces a parallel comic track involving Sakku's irreverent sister-in-law who oppresses her devout husband and doesn't allow him to pursue his devotional practice.

The Post-Seventies Goddess Film and its B-movie status

By the late seventies the *sati* genre declined steadily as many of the familiar *sati* stories had been exhausted or remade several times. But the genre of the *bhakti* film continued to survive in a different form—as a low budget B genre set in modern times and whose narrative was centred around a powerful goddess and a female devotee. Many of these

films were technically poor with weak screenplays and poorly conceived *mis-en-scene*. Most characters were types without much depth and the style was mostly frontal with little effort at creating the realist frame that would lend them depth and plausibility. The films addressed a primarily lower middle class female audience and began to be exhibited most commonly during the 11 am late morning show that was popular among this section of the film-viewing public.

This new avatar of the *bhakti* genre was different from the earlier *sati* films. In these the *sati* and goddess were not pitted against each other. On the contrary, the female devotee was usually a long-suffering wife who was oppressed either by the husband or his family and the goddess comes to her rescue. However, as Sunder Rajan cautions in a recent essay, the presence of the goddess in itself is not be taken as a sign of women's empowerment (Sunder Rajan 2002). It is imperative that we consider who mobilizes the goddess, in what context and towards what end.

There are many features that distinguish the new *bhakti* films from early reformist films and even the later social films in Telugu. The devotional films do not seek to reform or convert the masses of believers into modern reformed or sceptical subjects. In fact, in these films there is no patriarchal figure who is the representative of modernity and reason. Instead, at the centre of the narrative is a female believer whose sceptical husband or lover is usually forced by the narrative to accept the limitations of his belief in reason. The goddess takes the place of the narrative agent and moves the narrative forward to proclaim her own glory and power. Further unlike 1950s films like *Nagula Chavithi* and *Sati Anasuya* in which the goddess's claims to sovereignty are rendered problematic and untenable, in the '90s goddess films she remains more or less unchallenged. In the earlier

films, the goddesses are pitted against the sati figures—there is a splitting of the Woman into powerful and terrifying goddess who has no male consort and a woman whose prior subordination to husband secures her a representative status. In the goddess films, the character of the sati/devotee's relationship to the goddess is of a different nature. There is an aspect here of a mother/daughter relationship. She is after all the mother-goddess!

I suspect these films were considered B films, not simply because of their poor aesthetic quality, but more importantly perhaps, for not having a charismatic male star or a reformist citizen, either male or female at the centre of the narrative. The narrative is not organized around such a figure nor is it refracted through his or her point of view. The films often employ the style of *vrata kathas*[6] where episodes depicting the glory of a particular deity or a pilgrimage shrine are dramatized and the experiences of different devotees are narrated in loosely strung dramatic episodes. The only frame that unites them is the 'positivity' of the deity or the temple itself as it exists in contemporary times. This 'fact' is often presented in the film through documentary footage and through authoritative voice-overs! Unmediated by the gaze of the male star or the reforming citizen-gaze, or even the sati figure who anchored earlier narratives, these films run the risk of being seen as either cheap or exploitative and therefore, irresponsible. They can be (and indeed have been) accused of catering to the superstitions of the people. But these are precisely the reasons that make these "minor" genres interesting.

The late '70s and '80s saw an increasing number of goddess films being made in Telugu and Tamil. The actress K.R. Vijaya emerged as the star in these films. In many films like

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[6] *Vrata Kathas* are stories associated with particular Hindu rituals wherein the recitation of the story constitutes an important part of the ritual itself.

Devi Lalithamba (1973), *Devi Vijayam*, *Kadali Vacchina Kanakadurga*, she played the roles of goddess, female saint and devotee with great success. The K.R.Vijaya films were the precursors to the highly popular '90s goddess films. A close reading of the most successful goddess film of the '90s *Ammoru* (Kodi Ramakrishna 1995) will illustrate the transformations that occurred in this decade and also illuminate the limits and possibilities of these new subaltern narratives.

The Goddess and her Devotee in *Ammoru*

In the year 1995, when the goddess film genre seemed consigned to an irredeemable B status, came a surprisingly well-made film which became a major mainstream success attracting not only women viewers but the general film going public as well. Its cast included some fairly well-known actors whose status was further consolidated with the success of the film. Its plot was fairly gripping and coherent and most importantly, it boasted of some amazing special effects that were achieved with newly available computer generated graphics. Even a leading new director like Ramgopal Varma, famous for this political thrillers and horror films, was said to have been impressed with the film's level of technical excellence hitherto not seen on Telugu screen. S.V. Srinivas has recently argued that this particular goddess film and those that followed it succeeded in showcasing the possibilities of new cinematic technologies for the first time which were subsequently adopted in more mainstream genres featuring male stars.[7]

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[7] See S.V. Srinivas's unpublished paper titled, "Rendering the Goddess Mobile: The 1990s Devotional Film".

I will come to a discussion of the film's use of special effects later on, but for the moment let me pursue the questions that I have been concerned with through this chapter, namely the representation of the goddess, her relationship with her female devotee and the question of caste. Kalpana Ram whose work I already referred to has recently written a very important and insightful article about this new genre of films (Ram 2008). Ram examines the Tamil versions of these films which are usually made in either Telugu or Tamil and later dubbed into the other language. She rightly points to the affinities between the goddess presented in these films and the goddesses who are worshipped and feared by lower caste rural women in South India. Drawing upon her own earlier work, Ram begins her essay by presenting three narratives drawn from three different fields: a dalit woman's narrative collected in the course of her earlier ethnography, a narrative from a folklore performance and the third from a recent goddess film. Deliberately obscuring the different sources of these narratives, she points to the striking similarities they share. Her aim is to demonstrate the ways in which certain fundamental 'cultural schemas' that characterize the subaltern South Indian world are transposed across different media. She argues,

> what allows for these transpositions to occur in the first place is the existence
> of certain basic cultural schemas, in Bourdieu's sense of the term. The
> schemas entail a conjunction of elements at once more basic and also more
> impoverished, than any of their actual realisations, whether in cinema, or in
> ritual performance or in understandings of life itself. Pared back, the relevant
> schema probably consists of no more than a few relational pairs that are
> transposed on to one another according the particular situation at hand:
> woman/man, suffering/power, death/birth, human/divine, woman/goddess.
> Yet by virtue of being shared, schemas impoverished as they are, or more
> accurately, precisely because of their impoverished quality are able to connect
> different fields of practice, creating pathways whereby each field is able to
> lend its own power and meanings to the others......These relational pairs are
> easily mistaken for structuralist cognitive oppositions. But what travels from

one field to another are not simply cognitive or linguistic categories but embodied corporeal schemas (Ram 2008, 52).

I agree with the last part of her statement that embodied corporeal schemas are sought to be replicated on screen in the goddess films, indeed this can be said of all of the mythological and devotional films that I am discussing. However, I wonder if in paying attention to the basic even if impoverished cultural schemas, we might miss out on the crucial ways in which cinema embeds these in altogether new narratives and frameworks. In fleshing out these bare cultural schemas what new forms and new contours does cinema render them into? Further in these transpositions—humanly and technologically mediated—shouldn't we pay equal attention to the changes being made even as we keep in sight those aspects that remain the same. As I tried to show in earlier chapters, the questions that interest me are: in what specific ways does the cinematic medium transform mythic material? What are the ways in which it reshapes modes of viewing and hearing that are cultivated in the context of ritual and folk performative traditions or dramatic performances that draw on religious traditions?[8]

Hence, while there are insights that I draw from Ram's work, the emphasis and accent I wish to place upon them is quite different. In what follows, using the example of *Ammoru*, which as Ram herself notes is much closer, than most other films in this genre, "to the ritual depth of the tragic mode in South Indian culture", I examine the specific ways in which the film represents the subaltern goddess, her principal female devotee besides the interesting function it assigns to lay devotees in the village.

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[8] In the next chapter (Chapter 4) where I discuss issues relating to viewership, I use the notion of *habitus* elaborated recently by Asad to further think through some of these questions.

Subversion or Assimilation?

The success of *Ammoru* suggests that a complex process of subversion *and* assimilation is at work in relation to the goddess. There is a tension in the film between the desire for assimilation of the village goddess to great goddess tradition *and* a desire to retain her uniqueness as a village and lower-caste deity. The goddess in *Ammoru* is definitely not a Sanskritic goddess but a village goddess. This is indicated by the name *ammoru*, a lower-caste, non-standard rendering of *ammavaru* i.., *amma* (mother) with the honorific upper-caste suffix, *varu*. Furthermore, the goddess is represented in the film through the most rudimentary iconic depiction, a turmeric smeared stone fixed with silver eyes and a silver tongue. Most village goddess temples which start off with such idols later acquire Durga or Kali idols. In the film, however this idol remains the same in spite of the growing popularity of the temple. In the song that accompanies the title sequence we are told that the goddess is none other the *Adi-sakti* and *Parasakti*, both names which describe the goddess as the originary and ultimate power. Interestingly the idol is shown with rapid intercuts of popular calendar images of Durga and Kali besides the goddess herself (here played by Ramya Krishna). As her popularity grows the goddess soon acquires a Brahmin priest, an impressive temple structure and a growing number of devotees with female devotees representing a majority. There are scenes of *anna danam* (distribution of food). Some devotees (mostly male) even bring hens and goats as sacrificial offerings. While earlier films, both devotional and social, have always condemned this practice, the film does not adopt a reformist attitude towards this practice but simply records it as an

important part of goddess worship. This is indeed a significant departure.[9] There are also scenes of women getting possessed by the power of the goddess too.

The narrative is marked by the boundaries of the village in an important way and this is a feature common to most goddess films. However, both the goddess and the woman are indeed both literally and symbolically restrained from moving out. Both exhibit an inability to cross borders. The segment preceding the title sequence of the film shows us how the goddess is obliged to stay in the village because of a promise given to her devotee. Bhavani, the heroine of the film, loses her passport on the eve of her departure to America and is forced to stay behind in the village while her husband leaves the country.

While the goddess remains *ammoru,* a lower-caste deity, Bhavani despite her lowly origins (she is an orphan whose caste identity is unknown) performs the part of an upper-caste devotee throughout the film. Her performance of devoutness is that of an upper caste wife and the *vratam* is the primary ritual mode she adopts. Her relationship to the goddess too is cast in an upper-caste *bhakti* mode. She speaks to the goddess as a daughter. The goddess too speaks to her and comes to stay with her in the form of a little girl but never possesses her as she does her other devotees. There are no scenes of ecstatic possession, no singing and dancing by Bhavani at any point in the film. Interestingly enough, it is the goddess who gets ecstatic and joins heartily in the singing and dancing at the feast that is organized for her pleasure. Bhavani remains a devout, even indulgent spectator to this scene. In this sense, she seems to remain untouched by

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[9] Both *Malapilla* (1938), a reformist social and a devotional film, *Devi Lalithamba* (1973) condemn animal sacrifice as a superstitious practice that people ought to abandon.

the corporeal schemas of lower-caste devotional practices in which direct possession by the deity is a central feature.

Furthermore elements of the old reformist/citizen figure of the sati seem to persist through the character of Bhavani. In *Ammoru* a promise made to Bhavani contains the destructive powers of the goddess and reins her in. She cannot appear at will, but has to be ritually beckoned by the *sati*. Her narrative agency is conditional upon her devotee's will. That is why the film pictures the goddess in different guises as a wilful adolescent girl, as a middle-aged woman and as impetuous goddess! Bhavani, the devotee, however, remains the ever-suffering wife who is willing to sacrifice her own interests in order to please her husband's family.

Embodied Suffering and the Woman's *Bhakti* Film

Nevertheless, the troubled issues of sexuality and fertility that play such an important role in rural and urban poor women's lives, as both Ram and Vasanta Lakshmi demonstrate are themes that animate the majority of devotional films. Pregnancy, abortions and the difficulties of the birthing process are repeatedly thematized in many of these films (*Devi, Mahachandi, Devi Nagamma* to give just a few more examples) Another familiar theme is women's suffering at the hands of an oppressive patriarchal family structure. In *Ammoru*, all the obstacles and difficulties that come Bhavani's way are created by her husband's extended family in the absence of her husband. The dispute is also a typical one, a quarrel over the family's feudal wealth. The husband's family poison a pregnant Bhavani in order to induce a miscarriage, but the goddess takes in the poison herself and

saves the unborn child. Following this the family inflicts terrible physical violence upon her and nearly kill her. But once again the goddess makes an appearance right in time and saves Bhavani and the child by taking on the role of a mid-wife. In one of the film's impressive special effect scenes, the goddess (as young girl) multiplies herself five times over to perform simultaneously the different chores of a mid-wife.

In an insightful essay titled "Film Bodies, Gender, Genre and Excess", the film theorist, Linda Williams identifies three genres in American cinema—the classic woman's melodrama, the horror film and the pornographic film which are characterized by an excess (Williams 1991). She describes them as exemplifying "a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to more "dominant" modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative". She says that it is possible to assimilate all these genres under the general rubric of melodrama which had been described as having attributes like "spectacle, episodic presentation, or dependence on coincidence." Indeed much of Indian cinema has been criticized for precisely these reasons. She goes on to name these genres "body genres" because in all three there is a sensational display of the body, usually the female body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion. She says

> the body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping…an investigation of the visual and narrative pleasures found in the portrayal of these three types of excess could be important to a new direction in genre criticism that would take as its point of departure— rather than as an unexamined assumption—questions of gender construction, and gender address in relation to basic sexual fantasies (Williams 1991).

The second feature of these films that she identifies also relates as she points out, to the low cultural status they enjoy. "..what may especially mark these body genres as low is

the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in almost involuntary emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female." And indeed, the success of these genres is "measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen." She also asserts that "what seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement. We feel manipulated by these texts—too viscerally manipulated by the text in specifically gendered ways."

Many of the features of the woman's melodrama identified by Williams aptly describe the woman's *bhakti* film of the '80s and the '90s. Indeed a range of embodied responses have characterized the practice of watching the woman's bhakti films—weeping copiously, praying to and worshipping the images of the goddess on screen, even occasionally being possessed by the screen goddess and moving into a trance! Indeed, these seemingly excessive viewer responses have made many modern as well as feminist critics wary and anxious about the power these films seem to exert over a female audience. However, film makers began to see such responses as a measure of the film's success.

Linda Williams makes an interesting point about body genres and the seemingly perverse pleasures they seem to offer. She argues that audience identification is neither fixed nor passive in these films; rather there is a constant oscillation. Different genres are cultural forms of problem solving. "Like all popular genres, they address persistent problems in our culture, in our sexualities, in our very identities." Although she identifies an originary fantasy (seduction, castration, origin) as the problem that each of these genres seeks to confront and resolve, I wish to move away from the psychoanalytic framework that

Williams uses, to pursue the relation between gender and caste and the political-cultural question of citizenship in a democracy like India.

Williams talks about the melodrama and the horror film as two distinct genres in American cinema. But a new feature that distinguished the 1990s South Indian goddess film in particular was what might seem at first sight a strange and puzzling phenomenon. Elements of horror began to feature quite prominently along with the standard elements of the woman's melodrama. Why did the focus on *bhakti* and female hardships of earlier films need to be supplemented by the emotion of horror? What has invoked this horror? What is its relation to the new challenges for conceptualizing citizenship? These are some of the questions I speculate upon in the following section.

The Horror of an Unravelling Social: New Generic Elements in the 90s Goddess Film

The most obvious answer that suggests itself is that the nature of the goddess we see in the 90s is very different from her earlier appearances on Telugu screen. Fierce, lower-caste goddesses had hitherto been inadmissible as deities worthy of worship on the Telugu screen and to that extent these films were novel in introducing such goddesses into their narratives. As Kalpana Ram cited earlier alerts us, these goddesses move us beyond the "familiar tensions between Sanskritic forms of religion, and popular bhakti understandings of religion which modelled themselves on more intimate and primary relations of love." To the extent that such subaltern goddesses now find representation on screen, the 90s devotionals definitely make marked departures from earlier films. The

goddess is often pitted against male villains who worship malevolent unspecified deities who have no clear identity.

The invocation and elaboration of the emotion of horror through mis-en-scene, music and overall narrative structure is a distinctive feature of the 90s devotional films. These films borrow many formal aspects from the horror genres of both Hollywood and Indian cinema. However, the question of horror cannot be adequately addressed by simply referring to these new elements. Their significance needs to be sought both in the new plotlines and characters that people these films as well as in the social churning that was producing new modes of political subjectivity both on the cinema screen and outside it.

I argue that the "horror" in these films mirrors the horror of witnessing an unravelling of a social. In other words, the social structure and hierarchies that sustained an earlier order of power was seriously threatened in the last decade of the previous century. The earlier social that was carefully pieced together by a secular nationalist ideology and a planned economy was well elaborated in the mythological and social films of the post-independence decades. These films had instituted a new nationalist patriarchal social order with a male representative figure at the centre of it and with the woman being assigned the place of the *sati*. However, when new political subjectivities like the feminist, dalit, minority Muslim or Christian and backward castes began to assert their political rights, sometimes in the name of equality and universal citizenship but often through critiquing such universalist claims and by precisely asserting their difference. I think that horror was then perhaps one response to these challenges to earlier arrangements of power. The elements of horror in the goddess film ought to be seen then as one way through which new narrative structures can be put in place.

Mythological films discussed in earlier chapters were substantially inflected by the discourse of Telugu-Hindu nationalism. Many goddess films which have been and continue to be dubbed from Tamil to Telugu or vice versa do not feed into the Telugu nationalist discourse in the ways in which the Telugu mythological genre does. Moreover, there are no respected literary or dramatic traditions from which the goddess film derives its material. Many early sati films were, no doubt, based on popular sati figures from the *Puranas* well-known at the pan-Indian level. But in the post-70s devotional films, the stories and themes are drawn more from orally circulating folk tales and popular contemporary stories about particular goddesses and their shrines or more often on original screenplays. For example, the most successful 90s devotional film, *Ammoru* credits its story to the entire production unit. The story was a collective effort to come up with a generic village goddess story which is a pastiche of earlier films, oral legends and which combines the form of the woman's melodrama with the form of the popular horror novel and film.[10]

In *Ammoru*, for instance, there is a scene which recalls many similar scenes in the popular horror novel. An evil shaman, the principal villain of the film, seduces a young girl, drugs her and wishes to sacrifice her in a ritual to appease some evil spirits. In the eerie atmosphere of a graveyard, as he proceeds with his gory deeds, Bhavani chances upon him. Guessing his intentions, she alerts the local police and arrives with them to disrupt

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[10] Developments in the field of Telugu literature are pertinent here. While the seventies saw the emergence of powerful writing by women writers, the eighties were witness to the rise of the popular pulp novel that borrowed its structure from the Western pulp fiction. Male writers like Yendamuri Veerendranath and Malladi Krishnamurthy abandoned the burden of social realism and reformist orientation that characterized the Telugu novel and began writing novels of all genres—thriller, detective, horror, mystery and romance. Their primary aim was to provide entertainment to the Telugu reading public. The Telugu horror film borrowed many elements from Yendamuri's horror novels even as it borrowed from the Hollywood productions in this genre.

the crime. Earlier in the film Bhavani is introduced as an orphan and devotee of the local goddess. In this scene, however, we see her as a fearless crusader for justice, as a citizen who invokes the law to fight injustice. But as the film progresses and she is married and moves from the position of the orphan living in the temple to being the wife in a well-to-do household, she is rendered increasingly helpless and vulnerable and has to turn to the goddess for any kind of support. Her world becomes increasingly horror-filled as the evil shaman returns from prison and as her ill-luck would have it, he turns out to be her husband's cousin now set to seek revenge upon her.

In an extremely interesting sequence Bhavani's belief in what she sees is sorely put to the test. Her husband's family in their efforts to drive her out of the house hit upon a plan of psychological torture. They want to make Bhavani herself and everyone around believe that she is going mad. She begins to see things that nobody else can see (or so they have her believe). She cannot see what others are supposed to be able to see. In short, she loses a sense of certainty about people and things, her belief in her sensory perception—a condition of living sanely in the world. Fear and horror are a result of this loss of belief. It is by creating these intense and almost unbearable situations of helplessness and torture for the woman, that the film introduces dramatic moments of entry by the goddess effecting last-minute rescues. It is as if horror is a necessary precondition for the appearance of the unrestrained goddess power! Each horrific scene is followed by a spectacular special effects scene where the goddess displays her superior power!

Crowds and devotees in *Ammoru*

Several lay devotees who are part of the film's diegetic universe are mobilized at regular intervals to authenticate the appearance of the goddess. We hear rousing music in the background following the very first appearance of the goddess in the film and the miraculous appearance of her idol at the spot where she stood. Although it goes against the rules of realist cinema, the people of the village actually respond to this extra-diegetic music and recognize that the goddess has appeared in their village and rush to the spot. There are several close-up shots of hands folded and held up in reverence and heads facing the goddess. Their presence seems to vindicate and authenticate the appearance of the goddess. The subsequent growth of the temple's popularity too is recorded on screen through the comings and goings of this anonymous set of village devotees. But the crowd does not function merely as a mass of devotees who worship the goddess; it is also called upon to bear witness to several other crucial events in which Bhavani has to prove first her devotion to the goddess and later her sanity. These scenes point to the fact that the crowd can only be a mute witness and an unreliable witness at that because it can be easily deceived by the manipulation of appearances. In short, it is a superstitious crowd that believes all that it sees and hears. In their efforts to get rid of Bhavani, the film's villainous group stages a fake possession by the goddess. They bribe a soothsayer to act as if she were possessed by the goddess and speak the goddess' wish. She does so and the crowd deceived by this false performance wants Bhavani to participate in a nude ritual in order to bring rains to the village. She is, of course, rescued from this ignominy by the timely arrival of the male protagonist who is an English educated doctor. However, despite appearances, this rational, secular and modern figure does not have much of a role

in the narrative beyond this initial rescue effort. He is by no means the conventional male hero of the film. He is actually physically absent from the scene of action most of the time. Indeed, in many bhakti films, the husband is usually a sceptical man of reason or corrupt non-believer who is forced by the turn of events to realize his error and be converted into a meek devotee of the goddess.

To return to the question of the crowd of devotees in the film, I would like to point out that much like the crowd of devotees in the 1950s film *Nagula Chavithi*, which I discussed in the beginning of the chapter, the common devotees in the 1990s film *Ammoru* too remain impressionable and vulnerable to manipulation.

In Conclusion: Why is there no Female Socio-Fantasy?

As we have seen in the chapter on NTR, the new genre of the socio-fantasy emerged with the sublation of the mythological hero into a modern secular citizen; however, no such sublation seems possible in the case of the woman characters. Therefore, thus far there has been no socio-fantasy featuring a female star.

At the core of the citizenship lies a conceptual tension between the citizens and subjects as Balibar has demonstrated in his work (Balibar 1991), (Balibar 1988). The gap that separates citizens and subjects, the *subjectus* (who is subject to the authority of the Prince) from the *subjectum* (the sovereign subject who freely submits to the Law), is also one that can be mapped along gendered lines in popular cinema of the 1950s and 60s. While the male star is able to emerge as autonomous citizen, the female star as *sati*/good wife can only occupy the position of the *subjectus*. In the context I have been describing

the woman can only be a devoted wife before being a devotee to God. It is this prior submission to Husband/God that authorizes her as citizen, as citizen-devotee. It seems that her subjectivity is split into the all-powerful goddess and the female devotee, but cannot transcend both to appear as the autonomous sovereign figure that can quarrel with and question the gods and emerge as the representative figure in her own right.

In the 90s films too, despite the unapologetic portrayal of subaltern goddesses and their modes of worship, there remains a tension between the woman-devotee as wife and the all-powerful goddess. Before, I conclude let me reflect a little bit on a recent successful film *Arundhati* (2008) made by the producer-director team of *Ammoru*. The film is not a typical goddess film; it might be called a super-natural thriller where elements of goddess film are referenced.

In the many interviews with the media and the "success" meets that the makers of the film, *Arundhati* organized, Kodi Ramakrishna, its director, repeatedly stressed its woman-centeredness. It is a film about *stree shakti*, the story of an empowered woman who tackles an abominable and powerful villain. Even as Kodi's pro-women claims grew shriller by the meet, I was left wondering whom the film empowers and in what way. I will come back to this question presently but let us first examine the way in which the film reworks the familiar genre of the goddess film.

In *Arundhati*, the split between woman and goddess is refashioned in an interesting fashion. Unlike the goddess films discussed so far, there is no split between the wife-devotee and the powerful goddess. Nevertheless there is a split, only this time there is no great goddess invoked instead, it is the interplay between the woman's earlier birth as

Jejamma, the fearless ruler of a small kingdom, Gadwal, and her modern contemporary self as an ordinary girl preparing to marry her fiancé. Indeed like the spectator of the goddess film, she is initially possessed by her ancestral self against her will. Later on, of course, she willingly allows herself to be possessed by Jejamma and fights the villain of the film.

Unlike the comic socio-fantasies featuring male stars, this film could be seen as a female socio-fantasy where the upper-caste woman belonging to a feudal family asserts her might against the villain who is figured as a sexual predator. Unlike earlier goddess films, there is no oppressive patriarchal family against which the woman struggles; there is no elaboration of village ritual contexts where the goddess is worshipped. What we find here is an individualized and overtly sexualised struggle between the woman and the male antagonist. The film starkly brings forth the problematic nature of woman's agency and empowerment as it is fore grounded in some contemporary discourses. As subaltern caste and community identities of women are made invisible, the upper caste Hindu woman emerges as the sole representative of the (supernaturally) empowered woman in *Arundhati*.

Part II: Anthropology of Film-Making and Film Viewing Practices

Chapter Four

<u>Formations of Film Spectators as Devotees</u>

> Discourses about the cinema are discourses about its publics, their cultural status and cognitive dispositions, and are often governed by anxiety about the unpredictable nature of mass culture.
>
> --Ravi Vasudevan, "Disreputable and Illegal Publics"[11]

Classic realism in film assumed the disembodied spectator whose non-presence is a fiction that has to be maintained within the filmic narrative. As Linda Williams points out, theories of spectatorship in film studies too whether ideological or psychoanalytic, "presumed a distanced, decorporealized, monocular eye completely unimplicated in the objects of its vision" (Williams 1995, 7). Furthermore, realism as an aesthetic mode is linked to the notion of citizenship. As Andre Bazin believed the realist text guaranteed the spectator freedom of interpretation and that this freedom was crucially associated with the liberal and democratic consciousness of the American spectator (Bazin 1967). Therefore, realism was intrinsically linked to the ideal of the citizen-spectator.

Nevertheless genres within American cinema itself have overturned this supposition. As William's work has pointed out the presupposition of a disembodied citizen-spectator is challenged by genres like the melodrama, horror and pornography that produce an excess within the filmic text and reintroduce the idea of an embodied spectator who is moved to tears or is terrified or aroused (Williams 1991). More recent studies of cinema have therefore emphasized the "corporeality of vision" as well as the need for historically

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[11] (Vasudevan 2004)

grounded studies of spectatorship and cinematic reception rather than an effort to produce an over-arching theory of *the* cinematic spectator.

In the context of the Indian cinema and of mythologicals in particular, we have a spectator who is anything but disembodied and disinterested. Rather we encounter a spectator who is not only entertained but who also experiences a deep sense of devotion, who offers prayers to the gods on screen and in the case of the sub-genre of the goddess films in Telugu and Tamil, is even moved to a state of possession. Film making and publicity try to highlight this aspect and explicitly address the spectator as devotee. One of the common practices in Telugu cinema has been the setting up of make-shift shrines in the premises of film theatres screening mythological and devotional films. The film viewer is therefore invited to pray and worship at these shrines before going in to watch the film itself. How do we understand these intersections between film viewership and religious practice? How can we theorize the figure of the viewer who is both film viewer and devotee at the same time? An anthropological study of the inter-linked fields of film criticism, film-making (including film publicity), and viewership practices will further complicate the historical account of the mythological and devotional genres that the preceding chapters have provided. While earlier chapters have discussed the construction of the figure of the citizen-devotee in the filmic text itself, this part of the dissertation will consider the question of viewership more directly through an examination of the practices that surround the production and reception of the film text.

In the introduction to his book, *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad points out that popular perception equates anthropology with the pseudoscientific notion of fieldwork. According to him this is a reductive view of the discipline. He says that his own

understanding of the discipline comes from Mary Douglas' idea that modern

anthropology is the systematic inquiry into cultural concepts. Asad adds that the

distinctiveness of modern anthropology lies in its comparison of embedded concepts

(representations) between societies differently located in time or space. He remarks "the

important thing in this comparative analysis is not their origin (Western or non-Western),

but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable. Secularism—

like religion—is such a concept (Asad 2003, 7)." Therefore, while I do draw upon

insights gathered through conventional fieldwork, I pose these against the archive of film

biographies, memoirs, publicity material and film criticism in order to get a better

understanding of the contested figure of the spectator-devotee.

A number of studies produced in anthropology over the last two decades have engaged

with issues of sensory perception and the embodied corporeal nature of engagement with

modern forms of media.[12] These works provide important conceptual tools with which we

can approach the overlap between the spectator and devotee. In my introduction, I

referred to a recent issue of *Social Text* edited by Larkin and Hirschkind (Hirschkind and

Larkin 2008). The editors make some significant observations which are worth repeating

here. First of all, they emphasize the importance of the media in shaping religious

subjects. Secondly, they point to two lines of inquiry that the contributors to the volume

pursue. The first of these is concerned with the ways in which new forms of media are

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[12] (Pinney 2004), (K. Jain 2002), (K. Jain 2003), (Buck-Morss 1994), (Seremetakis 1994), (Larkin 2008), (Hirschkind 2006)

put to use in the preservation and dissemination of tradition and in the individual cultivation of religious sensibilities.

In the films that I examine, and the practices of film making, publicity and consumption that are associated with these genres, there are certainly practices that one might describe as having a major role in shaping and conditioning the sensory experience of people. Some of the new audio-visual technologies have also been used by people in the individual cultivation of piety or in establishing a community. The independent circulation of film songs is an excellent example in this regard. Often devotional songs from films plucked away from their place in particular narratives find a new habitation in auditory circuits of piety that is, they become part of the aural archive of songs that are played and broadcast at temples, at religious celebrations, at public festivals, in the news media and in the homes of the devout. These songs are not only simply heard repeatedly using audio technologies; often people learn the songs and sing these themselves on such occasions. A more curious practice is the way in which popular film tunes, whether they are devotional or not, are used to compose a devotional song. Therefore, the latest popular romantic tune is taken and filled with lyrics praising any popular deity, be it Ayyappa or Shirdi Sai Baba. This is a common enough practice and perhaps aids easy learning and collective singing. This also shows that an eclectic spirit dominates the practice of popular religiosity where the form can be borrowed from anywhere and can be filled with religious content without the least anxiety about the origin or the contaminating power of the original form.

Coming back to the film viewer proper, there are well-known instances of the viewers of mythological and devotional films either praying to gods on screen, singing along and

swaying during songs or even being possessed by the power of the deity on screen. Many of the embodied responses to these films would affirm what Christopher Pinney has called "corpothetics": the ways aesthetic forms demand a full corporeal engagement with the viewer and listener, acting on the body itself to produce intense affective states (Pinney 2004). At the same time, I think it is important to remember that these affective responses are understood and rendered intelligible or problematic by different discourses that circulate in and around films. These include film criticism, film publicity and film censorship to name just a few of the more institutionalized discourses. The printed calendars that are examined by Pinney and Jain, and the sermon cassettes examined by Hirschkind are both cheaply produced goods and due to their specific nature are amenable to individual private use and circulation. Unlike these, film production is an altogether more expensive proposition and is primarily meant for public and collective viewing. Post-1980s modes of circulation like TV (including satellite and cable television), VCDs and DVDs have definitely allowed for more private modes of film consumption; despite this film remains a capital-intensive commodity that is produced by an industry that needs to identify a logic, a structure and elements within it that can be named, branded and reproduced every time in order to make it saleable and successful. Hence, the unending search and speculation about the "magic hit formula" that will ensure a film's success. The very fact that a majority of the films are flops makes evident that this formula is an elusive one and not to be easily identified and reproduced. And it is this very unpredictability that publicity seeks to minimize, mitigate and counter. Publicity works to focus the centrifugal forces of the film narrative and the random and unpredictable nature of spectator responses into a coherent point that can be marketed. In

contrast to this, film criticism assumes a pedagogic role of educating viewers to be critical, modern subjects.

There is a second line of enquiry that Larkin and Hirschkind identify as being interested in examining the circulatory modes through which religious publics are constituted. They emphasize that this does not mean that the focus has shifted from religion to politics. Rather, they clarify that here the focus is on the specific conditions that "shape the possibilities of religious subjectivity and action."

Yet at the same time, I wonder if it is possible to conduct these two lines of enquiry independently. I think that this can only be a matter of emphasis and the line we may want to pursue will be ultimately decided by the nature of the research object as well as the context of research. Therefore, I begin by examining the perceptions about the Indian spectator that are popular among the secular and rational elite. I track these through government reports on film and general print journalism. I pose these against actual practices of film making and viewing using the idea of *habitus* as elaborated by Asad and other scholars following him, to examine the conditions within which certain kinds of viewership practices might be forged.[13] A close attention to the *habitus* of the film viewer will enable a deeper and finer appreciation of non-liberal, non-Western modes of subjectification. However, the end of this inquiry is not simply to demonstrate the culturally distinct orientations of Indian or Telugu viewers. The question I wish to pursue further is—in what ways does *habitus* change with the advent of modernity and modern ways of thinking and being? Hence, in the latter part of this chapter, adopting the

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[13] The notion of *habitus* is usually associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. However, Asad draws on Marcel Mauss' work to elaborate a different meaning and a different concept.

framework for studying popular culture suggested by Chatterjee recently, I proceed to examine the ways in which disciplines in popular film culture are engaging with and adapting to the changing times and the influence of new kinds of discourses. This will help us to capture the contested, conflicted and contradictory nature of the current ways in which we inhabit our not-quite modern, not-quite secular worlds today.

In the following pages I argue that the discourses of film-making and publicity as well as film criticism act as two significant conditions that shape the possibilities for the creation of particular kinds of film viewers in the Indian (and specifically Telugu) film context. Much of the film criticism one encounters in the print media constructs a figure of the spectator as gullible and in need of education into a secular critical reception; narratives of film making and film publicity, on the other hand, seek to interpellate the spectator both as a particular kind of national citizen and as a devotee. As practices of film publicity seek to promote a discourse of piety around their films, questions about the authenticity of audience responses and manipulation by the film and its publicity become contentious issues. In attempting to explore these inter-related issues, I draw upon writings on cinema as well as my own experience of film viewing over the years along with interviews with some viewers and two film makers that I conducted specifically for this dissertation. Actual spectator responses do not simply respond to or conform to either film criticism or film publicity—they constantly confound expectations of both secular media, and of publicity discourses. Indeed, as I will argue through this chapter, viewers themselves are formed within the matrix of culturally and historically determined embodied modes of being that are now enabled and conditioned by the new media as well

as the reorientation of sensibilities sought to be effected by secular criticism and film publicity.

Perceptions about the Indian Spectator

The British colonial perception of Indian audiences as ignorant, illiterate and superstitious has persisted long after the end of British rule. The ideas about the nature of audiences in India that were expressed in the 1920s continued to play a role well into the present. The Indian Cinematograph Committee Report (1927-28) that was commissioned by the colonial government is one of the richest sources of the state of cinema of that decade. The Committee's task was to assess the nature and demographics of Indian audiences, the grounds for film censorship, and the possibilities of creating a quota to promote "Empire films" (i.e British films) to counter the onslaught of American films in India. To this end, the Committee interviewed around 353 "witnesses" who included film actors, producers, distributors, exhibitors, film censors, newspaper editors and educationists. It published this "evidence" in four volumes. As scholars who studied the Report have commented, the subaltern spectator of the Indian cinema was a source of much concern for the colonial rulers as well as for the nationalist elite. This spectator was described variously as illiterate, uneducated, rural, ignorant, un-informed, religious, superstitious or as the working classes, the lower classes, youth etc.[14] This particular characterization of the Indian audiences has informed not only modern film criticism but also film policy and academic writing on Indian cinema. Therefore, the view expressed in

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[14] For more details on the ICC Report, see (Jaikumar 2007) and (M. M. Prasad 2009)

the ICC Report that illiterate masses prefer to watch mythological and folklore films is echoed in film criticism for many decades to come. There were, of course, those for whom the mythologicals could be seen a resource for inciting and strengthening of the nationalist sentiment. Indeed, the beginnings of cinema in India have been viewed as being inextricably tied to an idea of Swadeshi indigenism. Phalke's enterprise for setting up a filmmaking firm was a Swadeshi enterprise in two ways –not only was it set up with the help of cent per cent Indian capital, but it was also Indian in content that is, the themes, narratives and affects it produced were authentically Indian too. Hence, his famous proclamation that it was while watching the "Life of Christ" that he decided to set up India's own film industry so that Indian (primarily Hindu) gods and goddesses could appear on screen. Even K.A. Abbas, progressive film critic turned film-maker of the 1940s and 50s commented

> The popularity of early mythologicals, aesthetically crude as they might have been, was a manifestation of growing national consciousness. These popular legends of the gods and goddesses, familiar even to the commonest and poorest Indian, provided an oblique affirmation of the national sentiment against the threatened domination of alien culture.[15]

In the following section, I examine the forms of advertising that were adopted and a controversy surrounding the publicity of a particular film in the formative decade of the 1940s.

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[15] *Indian Movie News* 10: 4, November 1961. pp.10-11

Contesting Publicities: Creating a Liberal and Rational Spectator

Most often what the early mythological films promised was spectacle. Advertisements usually called their films "mighty mythologicals" claiming to recreate a past era, a splendour that was and is now resurrected on screen to give a glimpse of India's glorious past. It was not uncommon for each mythological film to highlight its own particular attraction—music, dance, splendid sets and costumes or special effects that recreate miracles. The mythological was simultaneously participating in a project not only of visualizing the past but also of recuperating it as glorious tradition and heritage. The historical-devotional films that recreated the lives of the *bhakti* saints of the medieval period consciously positioned themselves as contributing to the nationalist-reformist project. However, film advertising's claims on the nation and the audience it addresses did not go unchallenged. Both film criticism and governmental policy on film tried to reorient audience sensibilities in their own way.

In February 1944 the well-known English language film monthly *Film India* published an advertisement for the film *Mahatma Vidur* (1943). A two-page spread sheet affair, the ad carried statements of enthusiasm and approbation by several eminent personalities including the presidents of important political and social organizations like the Harijan Seva Sangh, the Servants of India Society, the Brahmin Sabha and judges and scholars. Compared to the other standard full-page ads of other films that *Film India* usually carried during this period, this was definitely unusual. Using the endorsement of public personalities as prominent copy material in the ad itself was also probably not a common feature. While the ad was therefore interesting in itself, the *Film India* editorial that

appeared the following month condemning the ad was even more interesting. The editorial titled "Innocent Abettors" was vehement in its attack on what it saw as the devious gimmicks of the film's publicists.

> [A]s these opinions are broadcast widely to attract people and pay for the film these popular personalities unwittingly become powerful instruments to perpetuate a huge fraud on the public. For, in this industrial age, whether the prevalent legal code recognizes it or not, it is a moral crime to misguide people into seeing a rotten film with the help of an unjustifiable publicity-boost.[16]

But the editorial was even more vituperative in its condemnation of the role that the eminent men had assumed as "amateur critics".

> These good hearted men from our public life, often shrewd in their own field of activities, innocently make fools of themselves when they become amateur critics and sit in judgment over Indian pictures. Film criticism does not happen to be such an easy job that every Tom, Dick and Harry, be he from the literary or the political field can sit in the darkness of a theatre for two and half hours and come out blinking in the open with a lightly formed opinion to air…film criticism is a specialized job which needs, in addition to the ability to evaluate the entertaining and instructive points in a film, a knowledge not only of the technique of production but also of the possibilities of improvement, both technical and cultural, in the film presented for criticism.[17]

Film India's editorial then proceeds to quote and compare its own review of the film, published the previous month with the copy of the advertisement arguing for the implicit merit of the review and the misleading nature of the ad. Indeed, in the mid-forties *Film India* published a series of editorials, articles and interviews which condemned the indiscriminate production of poorly made mythological and devotional films. These films, it argued relied on cheap spectacle and "miracle-mongering" to mislead a public

[16] Filmindia, March 1944. p. 9

[17] ibid p. 5

which was excessively religious and superstitious. For instance, in its review of the 1945 film, *Mahasati Anasuya* starring Durga Khote, Film India remarks that it was "the most sickening film ever seen" and that it was "an abortion of art." It adds further that "A saint and a sati picture is not a rare commodity in India, seeing that religiosity is a national disease with the people."[18] In review after vicious review it attacked these films and called for progressive social films which were made in a realist mode.

The *Mahatma Vidur* affair and *Film India's* more general campaign against mythological and devotional films can be read as a valiant attempt at demarcating and defending the role of film criticism as an intelligent and objective guide to viewers and as a corrective to irresponsible or boastful advertising. It also saw itself as responsible for educating the viewers into a modern historical and critical sensibility. Therefore, very often the films were faulted for being poorly researched, or for anachronisms of settings or costumes, or for distorting characters and events in the service of a dramatic narrative.

But *Film India* was not alone in its opinions; they were widely shared among the modern Indian elite. *Talk-A-Tone*, an English film periodical published from Madras and focussing on South Indian cinema wrote in 1949: "Why is it that these gentlemen (filmmakers) go after mythological stories for the themes of their play? ... They run after money and the best way to extract money from religious people is by presenting to them a story with a religious title (Devan 1949)."

The *Talk-A-Tone* essayist even went to the extent of proposing that religious themes be avoided altogether because it alienates people from other religions.

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[18] (Our Review: Anasuya, A Dave-Vyas Abortion of Art: A Sickening Picture Ever Seen 1944)

> These gentlemen (filmmakers) have partiality towards Hindu Mythology. They select stories from old Hindu Puranas and Sastras and edit them. It is quite natural that religious people other than Hindus may not be able to understand or appreciate the trend of the story and they practically curse the film and its producers. This reluctance on the part of producers of other religious mythologies embitters communal feelings which already exist between different religious sects in our country. And is it not the best way that producers avoid mythological stories altogether and adhere to some beautifully written social stories so that no religion can complain about the selection of the story while the high objects and utility of films can be realised and appreciated? (Devan 1949)

This was one kind of secular response to the making of films with religious and mythological subjects. If religion was kept out of a public art form like cinema, then there would be no feelings of bitterness or animosity between different religious communities. Let religion be a private matter and one of individual belief; let it make no intrusion into the public sphere.

Indeed the Indian Cinematograph Committee had deliberated on this matter and wondered whether censorship would be an appropriate response. In the second part of the report, the Committee posed a question about the conditions under which the state could intervene and censor a film. They asked, "Should more care be taken in censoring films likely to offend religious susceptibilities?" A written response was given by Mr. P.R. Tipnis, Proprietor, New Royal Cinema, and Secretary, the Great Eastern Corporation Ltd., Delhi. Tipnis was the producer of the first Indian picture in 1911, *Pundalik* and also produced the film *Light of Asia* in 1926. The response is very interesting in terms of what it believed to be the responsibility of a secular liberal state in relation to "excessive" religious sentiments. Tipnis does not believe that such care should be taken and explains why. I quote his answer in full:

26. a) "No. On the other hand religious susceptibilities are now-a –days too much made of. For example, the Muhammadans do not suffer any picture made of depicting the life of their Prophet. This may or may not be reasonable, but that they should resent films like, "The Moon of Israel", it is most objectionable—when there is no direct attack on their religion or any deliberate perversion of their beliefs, they cannot prevent other communities from seeing such films. As the censors have certified the film, "The Life of Christ" for Christians only, I think the films like the "Moon of Israel" etc. should be certified as for "all except Muhammadans". Otherwise the fanaticism of a particular community will interfere with the rights of other communities. Take the instance of the film, "The Light of Asia" depicting the life of Lord Buddha, the general tenor of the film version is true to the teachings of Lord Buddha and other communities on seeing the picture will be favourably impressed by the life of the Buddhist prophet. But the fanaticism of the Muhammadans also caught a small section of the Buddhists in Ceylon and the Malay states and the government instead of being strong yielded to the agitation and banned its exhibition. Now the question arose there also that to satisfy the whims of a small section, the whole community was not allowed to see the film. Not only that but the other communities simply because they were in Ceylon could not see the film which has been admired everywhere it was shown. That is why I say that if the whole community is willing to leave its conscience in the keeping of its fanatic section, let it, but it should not be allowed to interfere with the rights of other community in seeing the film. Let such films be certified as meant for others than the particular community.

I think the films should not be deprived of their liberty any more than the books. If at any particular place, the administration apprehends any damage to the public peace, let that administration take the responsibility for the stoppage of a certain film in that area. But the censor must be left unfettered by such considerations.

Several aspects of Tipnis' statement warrant a comment. First of all, it is quite clear that Tipnis is very disapproving of the importance given to such things as religious susceptibilities. The British government's committee seems more mindful of them.[19] But it needs to be recognised that for both the committee (which proposed censorship with the purpose of not offending religious susceptibilities) and Tipnis (who is opposed to it in the

[19] After the 1857 revolt, the British government was particularly anxious not to offend religious sensibilities. See Nicholas Dirks' chapter on the hook swinging controversy in Southern India in his book, *Castes of Mind*. (Dirks 2001)

name of liberty and freedom), these susceptibilities are a problem for governance.

Whether they are taken seriously or dismissed, it is in the interests of governance that this

decision is made. While the government wishes to avoid any "trouble", Tipnis argues for

preserving the rights of those who are opposed to such 'fanaticism' within the religious

community and the rights of other religious communities to watch the films that are made

about them. Mohammedans are clearly seen as more prone to taking offence and it is

believed that this attitude needs to be discouraged through government action. He is

willing to concede that in places where "public peace" is threatened, the film in question

could be stopped. Wendy Brown has argued recently both tolerance and the withholding

of it work as instruments of power and within a logic of governmentality (Brown 2008).

As she remarks, "the invocation of tolerance functions as a critical index of the limited

reach of liberal equality claims. Practices of tolerance are tacit acknowledgements that

the Other remains politically outside a norm of citizenship, that the Other remains

politically other, that it has not been fully incorporated by a liberal discourse of equality

and cannot be managed through a division of labor suffused with the terms of its

subordination (Brown 2008, 75)." We have already seen in an earlier chapter how the

dominant conception of the citizen-devotee is a casteless (read upper-caste), pan-Indian

Hindu which renders the Muslim as Other and as object of tolerance.[20]

To return to the *Talk-A-Tone* essayist, South Indian film producers seemed not to have

heeded his advice about abstaining from religious themes altogether. From the 1950s

onwards the mythological and devotional genres became marginal genres in Hindi,

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[20] See Chapter 2 of this dissertation. I will be discussing the transformations that governmentality has effected in the category of religion, the role of cinema and other media in this process and the implications of these transformations in the last two chapters.

Telugu cinema however continued to make films based on religious myths and indeed introduced many innovations in presenting these films in theatres. In the later sections, I will describe in brief some of these practices; however, for now I continue with the discussion of another register in which audience propensities become the object of anxiety and concern. This I do through tracing the way in which the term, "sentiment" figures in popular print discourse about film.

The Anxiety about Sentiments in Telugu Cinema

The range of meanings attached to the word "sentiment" move from neutral definitions like "a mental feeling" and a "view or tendency based on or coloured with emotion" to the ones that strike a disapproving tone as in "being sentimental", "the tendency to be swayed by feeling rather than by reason" and worse, it signifies a "mawkish tenderness" (OED 1990). Sensibility is defined as "the capacity to feel" and as "openness to emotional impression, susceptibility, sensitiveness" (OED 1990). A related word, "susceptible" means to be "impressionable, sensitive and easily moved by emotion."

So it seems as if sentiments can be either noble and desirable, or irrational and undesirable—in both cases however, it is believed that they are not informed by reason. To be sentimental is to be swayed by emotion rather than reason. Often religious ideas and beliefs are described as religious sentiments or sensibilities and susceptibilities. As such they cannot and should not be hurt; rather they should be tolerated. Women are often described to be more sentimental and susceptible than men; sentiments of minority groups are especially vulnerable to hurt (for both women and minorities are less

rational?). Tough administration or the administration of tolerance is seen to be the only answer to both. The general understanding of the term "sentiments" then conveys both a recognition of their existence and a mild disapproval of relying too much on them. Surely, everyone should strive to be less sentimental and more rational. It is against this general background that I will try to understand what this term "sentiment" tries to gather and name in the discussions in the Telugu film industry. I argue that the anxiety about sentiments arises in the context of efforts by different discourses to shift and reorient viewer sensibilities. These include state film policy and censorship, film publicity, modern, secular film criticism and a critique of film by different groups and movements.

The English term "sentiment" enjoys a wide circulation and has a curious life in the Telugu film industry. Although I have not come across the term in writings from the 1950s and 60s, it is quite possible that it must have been in use and circulation even then. Since the 1970s, however, it occupies a prominent position in discourses on cinema. On the one hand, it plays an important role in the discussions among film makers about what kind of sentiments and in what proportion make for a successful film. Those films that respect and reinforce existing sentiments among the general populace are believed to be more successful. Therefore, film producers are anxious to preserve such elements in their films and are generally wary of stories that challenge or critique them in any fundamental way.

In referring to films that they were making, often the filmmakers of the 60s and 70s described them as being dominated by "sister-sentiment" or "mother-sentiment". Sentiment was used to designate an (critics would call it "excessive") emotional attachment that the hero of the film displayed towards his sister or mother. This emotion

became the moving force in the film and determined the course of the narrative. Although less common there have been films where a "brother", "father" or "child sentiment" too proved to be the motor force behind narrative movement.[21] In addition to these, the sati films and other women's melodramas of the period were seen to be informed by a *pativrata*[22] sentiment while devotional films were seen to be exploiting the sentiment of *bhakti* among common people

However, by the late 1970s and 80s the excesses associated with films that featured sister-love and mother-love or even the love for a particular god or devotion to husband/god became the object of criticism and satire among the literate middle-classes. Women's films in general, in which women were portrayed as long-suffering chaste and devoted wives and mothers were being severely criticized by women writers. Commenting on the women's melodramas of the time, Vasireddi Seeta Devi, a well-known novelist describes how "as a film nears completion, the producer's heart beats faster. A family show is arranged even before the film is censored. After the show, the producers and directors gaze anxiously into the faces of the women emerging from the theatre. If the women come out wiping their tears with swollen eyes and reddened noses,

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[21] Madhava Prasad has described the emergence of sister-love in South Indian cinema of the fifties and sixties as one of the techniques through which regional linguistic patriarchies were articulated and consolidated. Discussing the roles played by South Indian stars like NTR, MGR and Raj Kumar, Prasad argues, "At the height of their career as star-representatives of the linguistic community, these stars cannot indulge in romance without maintaining, as a supplementary feature of their subjectivity, a paternal function which extends to all characters in the film, including the heroine. The mandatory sub-plots of sister-love in the South Indian cinema with their emotional excesses, are also part of the narrative technology that assists in the elevation of the male star to a paternal status... Sister-love is a ingenious solution for the problem of narrative authority that the popular cinema faces" (M. M. Prasad 2004, 108). By the seventies however, sister-sentiment like other similar sentiments were being critiqued especially by women writers.

[22] *Pativrata* is the term given to a devoted wife, an ideal wife. The term literally means "one who is dedicated to her husband."

the producer is a happy man."[23] She writes angrily that the Telugu film industry is sustained by the tears that women shed. She says that film producers believed that depicting a woman as rebelling against her lot and affirming her selfhood would be seen as "anti-sentiment" by female audiences and therefore such films will not work at the box-office. Referring to a successful progressive film of the time, *Manushulu Maarali*, she asks, "Isn't it anti-sentiment to show a mother poisoning her own children? Then why did it [the film] win the appreciation of the female audiences? The scene was able to convince the audiences that the character had no other option under the circumstances". She argues that if a film is strong in both visual and narrative terms it will surely be successful even if it critiqued popular sentiments. She appeals to women viewers in particular that they should stop shedding tears watching the sufferings of helpless and docile women characters. "We have been weeping for centuries on. We have been heaping praises on women who suffer and women who cry. We have been bestowing upon them the clichéd title of *pativrata*. Let us in this women's decade, bid goodbye to our tears. Let us lend support to our sisters who fight against oppression and injustice. Let us reject all those stories and all those films that portray moth-eaten images of *pativrata*."[24] She makes a call to all women—"Respect the Sita, Savitri and Sumati who rebel. Only then will we get good cinema." Seeta Devi's writing gives us a sense of the prevailing arguments, mood and tone of the women's movement in India and in Andhra Pradesh. Several other prominent women writers of the time like Madireddi Sulochana and Muppalla Ranganayakamma too were writing about the problematic portrayal of

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[23] (Seeta Devi 1976) Translated from Telugu and reprinted in the dossier prepared for the "Workshop on Telugu Cinema: History, Culture, Theory" August 13-16th, 1999 organized by Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad and the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore. Pp.20-21

[24] The 1970s was declared as the International Decade for Women by the UN.

women in cinema.[25] In all these writings women were exhorted to give up their tendency to weep easily and rework themselves to be critical of all sentiments that sought to secure their subordination. The 1980s and the early 90s saw the flowering of a powerful feminist literature and movement. Starting from the late 80s and through the decade of the 90s, there was also the emergence of a strong dalit-bahujan movement in the state. A critique of popular cinema was one of the intellectual tasks that both these movement too undertook.[26]

But it was not only movements like these that critiqued cinema; there was a more general attack on the melodramas of the time. Print periodicals of the time featured many cartoons ridiculed woman's films (*mahila chitralu*) as unrelenting weepies. The most memorable of satirical writings that emerged during this time was by Mallik, a popular cartoonist of the eighties. His satire of Telugu cinema titled, *Superhit Anu Dikkumalina Kadha* was serialized in the weekly, *Andhra Bhoomi*. I cannot recall now if Mallik used the word "sentiment" but certainly his writing ridiculed several popular narrative and thematic conventions in Telugu cinema—like the excessive devotion to the mother, obsessive love towards the sister, twins separated at birth, precocious children who spoke solemnly about weighty matters, a hero who was invincible and a heroine who is rich, beautiful and arrogant and who is subsequently tamed for domesticity by the hero. Mallik's writings along with others marked a shift in perception of such themes and associated narratives in Telugu cinema. Therefore, familial sentiments that were valued

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[25] For a sample of writings by these writers in English translation, see the dossier prepared for the "Workshop on Telugu Cinema: History, Culture, Theory" August 13-16th, 1999 organized by Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad and the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore. See esp. Pp. 78-84.

[26] See ibid. for examples of dalit-bahujan critique of popular cinema.

earlier were now being re-evaluated and a new sensibility that was critical of these was being forged.

Today among the middle class Telugu reading and viewing public too, many religious beliefs and customs are described by the English term, "sentiment", sometimes with a touch of self-consciousness but most often in all seriousness. While some sentiments seem to have power enough to generate genuine emotion, others are subject to satire and ridicule. As the makers of *Ammoru* commented "The mythological genre may have declined due to the familiarity of these stories but the devotional film will always remain a viable and popular genre because the sentiment of *bhakti* remains strong among people".[27]

At first glance it might seem as if these two tendencies with relation to sentiment can be mapped on to caste/class distinctions in society. In other words, it could be argued that while some sentiments remain genuine for the subaltern classes (women, lower caste/class people, rural audiences), the so-called B and C centre audiences of Telugu cinema, the same sentiments are satirized and ridiculed to satisfy the modern sensibilities of the upper caste and urban audiences. No such easy mapping of these categories is possible. By the 1990s both films which mobilize familial and bhakti sentiments as well as those that critique and satirize them are equally successful at the box-office and with all segments of audiences. In his year-end review of Telugu films in 1995, the well-known Telugu film critic, Gudipoodi Srihari, remarked that the year's successful films proved once again that "youth" and "lady" audiences are the dominant segments among

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[27] Personal Interviews with film producer, Shyam Prasad Reddy and film director, Kodi Ramakrishna conducted on October 23rd, 2006.

the audience groups (Srihari 1995). He also remarked that "family sentiment" films are the most popular with audiences. While this is indeed true, it is also equally true that many a film of this period "parodies the very elements and conventions of popular cinema that it continues to depend on" as S.V. Srinivas notes in his work on the Telugu mass film in the 90s (S. Srinivas 2009, 217). Therefore, popular films that are regular melodramas anchor their narratives explicitly in feudal familial sentiments (like the sister-sentiment) but also incorporate *within the same filmic narrative* a parallel comedy track that parodies these sentiments.

This shift in the way in which sentiment is used in relation to film signals that particular films require audiences with particular kinds of sensibilities. Genres are often made and marketed with this in view—melodrama and romances for women, horror and action for young men, romantic comedies for families, and so on. This division imagines the particular segment of spectators for each of these genres to be endowed with certain sensibilities that will allow them to appreciate certain kinds of filmic narratives. However, as noted by several theorists of Indian cinema, the development of genres in Indian cinemas has not followed the logic of either Hollywood or European cinema. Here the "social" or more precisely the family melodrama has emerged as the super genre that sought to cater to all segments of audiences. At the same time, shifting patterns within the structure of this larger genre display negotiations over how and in what way the "social" itself can be refigured. The debates and anxiety around "sentiments", I argue opens a window onto these negotiations over the social and allows us to perceive a gradual and variegated shift in sensibilities.

As the forms of sociality and relations of power that undergirded certain familial sentiments, feelings and emotions undergo change not only because of shifting economic relations but also because of social and political struggles like the feminist or the dalit-bahujan movement, older sentiments and sensibilities are either directly challenged, reoriented and/or become objects of satire and ridicule. The circulation of the term of the English term "sentiment" retains its status as a borrowed concept from a colonial governmental register but which like many other such terms is so deeply imbricated in the present habits of thought about "re-forming" the social.[28]

The feminist critique of popular sentiments in cinema was faced with a challenge from a new genre in the 1980s. The increasing popularity and mainstreaming of the B grade genre of the goddess film seemed to draw on the energy of the feminist and dalit movements but also posed many new questions for them. The goddess film valorised the lower caste village goddesses in a way earlier films had not. At the same time the form of the melodrama evident in the sati films was retained and even taken to a new heightened pitch. Even more intriguing and a cause for anxiety and puzzlement were the reports about women getting possessed in these films. I now turn to a consideration of this new avatar of the irrational Indian spectator.

The Goddess Film and the Possessed Spectator of the eighties and the nineties

As already mentioned, during the early years of cinema in India, the subaltern spectator was cause of much anxiety. As I showed in an earlier section the entire class of subaltern

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[28] 'Nativity' is another favorite English term (a concept-metaphor?) of the Telugu film industry. See (S. Srinivas 2006) for a discussion of this term.

spectators was grouped together as illiterate, superstitious and backward. Since the 1970s , in the particular case of Telugu cinema, the male spectator gets profiled as rowdy and the female spectator is singled out as superstitious and backward. The woman viewer is believed to weak and mired in unnecessary religiosity and sentimentalism. The 11am shows were reserved for women and by extension therefore for women's melodramas and devotional films. The female viewer until then was merely seen to be prone to weeping and hence susceptible to manipulation by the film, the reports of possessions in theatres however presented a new problem.

The increasing popularity of the goddess film provoked a debate in the public sphere about this new figure. There were once again reports in the popular press which bemoaned the irrationality and superstitious nature of the film viewer on the one hand while also dismissing such reports as false and misleading publicity by filmmakers. Reviewers of the films wondered how "irreligious" aspects like erotic dances and violent fights could be justified in so-called devotional films. Following the success of the film *Ammoru* and reports of possessions in the screenings of this film, the popular Telugu daily *Eenadu* is believed to have published an article criticizing the publicists of the film for making false claims and seeking to attract audiences through such gimmicks. Denying the allegations, the filmmakers simply saw it as an indication of the film authenticity and effectiveness. Kodi Ramakrishna, the director of the film, declared that a goddess film that does not provoke possessions ought to be considered a failure.[29]

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[29] Shyam Prasad Reddy, the producer of the film, mentioned the *Eenadu* article to me. He said that it had appeared soon after the release of the film. However, in spite of a thorough search of the Eenadu Hyderabad editions from November 1995 (when the film was released) to around February 1996, I could not find this article. It was perhaps published in an edition from another town. S.V. Srinivas in his

The film poster of a popular Tamil goddess film exemplifies this thinking very well. The film tried to advertise its worth precisely by invoking the figure of the possessed spectator. The poster combined a photographic still of a smiling goddess from the film with a "real" photograph of a crowd of "real" spectators all of whom had presumably gathered to watch the film.[30] In the foreground of this crowd was a "possessed" spectator whose contorted face and body shows that she is not in control of herself and is possessed by some other force. The people around the woman try to hold her and pacify her. A ray of light stretches across the poster from the palm of the film's goddess to this possessed spectator as if in blessing and acknowledgement of the devotion.[31]

While the possessed viewer as an object of anxiety appeared often enough in journalistic writing and popular middle class discourse about devotional cinema, she appeared as the prime addressee of the goddess film and as ideal spectator in film publicity. Despite this, in the mid-2000s when I conducted fieldwork for this dissertation, it was not easy for me to locate such spectators. In the many interviews that I conducted for this project it was hard to actually meet a spectator who openly claimed to have been possessed; indeed such a spectator was an appropriately elusive figure. For many of the middle class women I interviewed, women who get possessed were either lower class and by implication lower caste or they were figures from an earlier time—older female relatives and neighbours they knew in the past. In my attempts at interviewing lower class/caste

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unpublished work on the Telugu devotionals refers to several Telugu newspaper articles that report possessions in theatres in the nineties.

[30] A careful examination however reveals that the photo of the "real" spectators has been digitally reproduced thrice in the frame of the poster in order to fill it up. See Appendix 1 at the end of the dissertation.

[31] See Figure 11 in Appendix for this poster. See the CSCS archives for more goddess film posters

women, it was hard to find women who wanted to talk about cinema in general let alone

the specific films that I was referring to. Therefore, this figure of the possessed spectator

who so completely identifies with the image on screen and allows the power of cinema to

possess her seems to be more a spectre that haunts and threatens the modern ideal

spectator. It is one of the modern spectator's doubles and shares much with that other

figure that causes anxiety—the male fan. Madhava Prasad's and S.V. Srinivas' work, to

which I have already alluded in passing, provides us with a textured and insightful

understanding of this figure's investment in politics (M. M. Prasad 2004), (S. Srinivas

2006). The insights their work offers are invaluable for my own thinking in this regard.

Despite many differences in approach and focus, both scholars dispute the hitherto

reigning common-sense (both academic and popular) that the male fan's devotion to the

star replicates the hierarchical relation of devotee and God. Both argue that a different

approach than the one in which a passive and submissive subaltern is believed to mistake

the star for God, is required in order to properly understand the dynamic of this

relationship and by extension its import for an understanding of the relation between

South Indian cinema and politics. Through a rich ethnography of activities of fans of the

Telugu film star Chiranjeevi, Srinivas argues that:

> Fans themselves speak of their relationship to their idols in terms of loyalty,
> devotion, etc., giving the impression that their actions have to do with extant
> ways of relating to social superiors and gods. In my examination of the fan-
> star relationship, I emphasize the conditional nature of the fan's loyalty to the
> star. The fan is a loyal follower and devotee only if the star lives up to the
> expectations the fan has of him. The conditional loyalty of fans is premised
> on the star's recognition of their well defined set of entitlements related to
> him and his films. This results in a situation in which fans become the
> guardians of the star's image (S. Srinivas 2006, xxviii).

While Srinivas emphasizes the conditional nature of the fan's devotion, Prasad's work

provides an ideological reading of the Tamil star Rajnikanth's films and the seemingly

excessive enthusiasm that his fans exhibit for this star. Like Srinivas, he too argues, "We

must avoid assuming that the elements that go to make the performance of bhakti are in

themselves embodiments of a fixed idea of religious worship (M. M. Prasad 2009, 73)."

Instead he proposes that fan *bhakti* borrows from the forms and idioms of religious

activity but is an entirely political activity. It is a manifestation of the crisis of

sovereignty in India where popular sovereignty although declared has not been actualised

and therefore what we find is an array of fragmented sovereignties of which the political

power of the film star is one. He reads fan bhakti as a form of enthusiasm which enables

the forging of communities[32]. The enthusiasm that unites the community of fans is a

result not of an illusion about the star's power or of religious belief; rather it is creates a

virtual political space where the subaltern fan reposes his sovereignty in the figure of the

star and nominates him as sovereign over this domain.

> With such a star, the spectator relates, not as one sovereign to another, but as
> one element in a collective whose identity depends upon the presence of
> sovereign star at the apex. There could be no clearer evidence than is offered
> by these films, for the fact that majority of Indians do not occupy the
> substantive subject-position of citizenship. Their subalternity takes the form
> of dependence on such exemplary entities for any chance of a share in
> collective sovereignty (M. M. Prasad 2009, 75).

Prasad clarifies that fan activity is not to be explained away simply as group psychology

or as a psychic identification with the star. "It is more akin to a virtual socio-political

order within which subjects feel securely located."

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[32] It is interesting to note here that the etymologically speaking "en-theous" is "possessed by God".

Prasad's work opens up a fertile new terrain that will, no doubt, provide impetus for much new work; for the more modest inquiry that I undertake here, I will engage with only some of the questions he raises. A great part of his critical labour is directed towards separating the political enthusiasm of the fans from the religious enthusiasm suggested by the term, *bhakti*. As in his earlier essay, "Reigning Stars", which explores the relation between South Indian politics and film stars, he is very critical of careless and hasty "Indological" explanations that offer as causal factors the "religious bent of Indian people" or "the superstitious or illiterate character of the Indian subaltern". His work strains against an earlier tendency in popular as well as scholarly discourse in which the "religiosity of the Indian people and society" is a readily available explanatory framework and the "political significance" of events, acts, motives is always disavowed. He argues persuasively that several concepts in India have over time acquired new shades of meaning and that the old Indological approach that seeks to discover or rather uncover the underlying original/essential meanings of terms and usages in order to better appreciate the culture of India is mistaken in its assumption of the continuity of tradition. This etymology based approach is not attentive, he says to "shifts in meaning effected by (such) extensions of terms to new areas." In this regard, his work is undoubtedly an important corrective.

However, I wonder what is lost or missed out in this care to distinguish and rescue the properly "political" from the properly "religious". How do we understand the politics of religion and the religious idioms employed in contemporary politics? Taking up Prasad's suggestive remarks about translation we could extend them in a different direction that he himself does not move in. Following the general framework adopted in this dissertation,

we could argue that *bhakti* (devotion) and *bhakta* (devotee) have indeed been invested with new meanings. Some of these new meanings derive from the way in which religious identity has been legalised and instituted through the Indian constitution; also through the ways in which secular doctrine has been shaped in Indian politics and the way in which religious identity and secularism manifest themselves in the cinema and the media. I will be dealing with the first two issues elaborately in the last chapter. More pertinent to the discussion at hand are the viewer responses to the mythological and devotional films. How do we understand the viewer-devotee of these films? While I agree that the Chiranjeevi or Rajnikanth fan is not religious-minded, I would also argue that neither is the spectator of the devotionals religious in any simple-minded or reified sense.

Unlike the organized fans' associations which are predominantly male, the woman who weeps copiously in the cinema hall or who gets possessed during goddess film screenings in the cinema hall is not amenable to recruitment into social service or mobilization into organized politics of any kind. Moreover the moment of possession is itself random and fleeting, seldom does it extend beyond the confines of the cinema theatre. Nevertheless, the possession is political in its own way. One possible way of reading this is as an attempt at redefining power hierarchies even if momentarily. Like the socio-fantasy, the goddess film too is a fantasy that illuminates the possibilities of unleashed female power through the image of the omnipotent goddess. The spectator weeping until then partakes of the goddess power in the moment of possession. In these films when patriarchal authority is subordinated to goddess power, we can glimpse other potential figurations of power. As Kalpana Ram has rightly pointed out:

> To the extent that feminism itself comes to view the splitting of the self as an index of the fundamental crippling of women in patriarchy, and implicitly posits a unified and continuous self as the aspiration of a feminist sense of subject hood, we stand the risk which is acute in a country such as India—that of ceasing to be able to apprehend the voices of women who situate their experiences within a religious framework (Ram 2001).

While an earlier feminism would read the very phenomenon of possession as a sign of women's subordination, the work of Ram and some others has begun to rethink the idea of agency as not simply the capacity to defy tradition and resist power and authority. Being possessed in a ritual context or in the cinema hall could be read as one possible way at re-scripting existing hierarchies. Many studies of folk art forms in India have stressed the embodied and visceral nature of the responses that are provoked by these forms. Viewers and listeners of these events do not sit quietly respecting the imaginary fourth wall that proscenium theatre posits. Audience participation of various kinds has been noted as have been instances of physical responses that range from clapping, whistling and hooting to weeping, praying and being possessed by deities on stage or screen. Indeed as specific studies of ritual performances show these art forms and responses to these forms combine art and piety effortlessly.[33] In that sense, audiences of mythological and devotional films carry with them to the cinema embodied dispositions and sensibilities that have been cultivated in these traditional contexts. Let me now turn therefore to the insightful discussion of the notion of *habitus* by Talal Asad.

Habitus and Agency

Asad's work provides us with a useful way of thinking about human agency:

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[33] (Kapur 1990), (Jain 2010)

> The concept of *habitus* invites us to analyze any assemblage of embodied aptitudes not as systems of meaning to be deciphered. In Mauss's view, the human body was not to be regarded simply as the passive recipient of "cultural imprints" that can be imposed on the body by repetitive discipline— still less as the active source of "natural expressions" clothed in local history and culture—but as the self-developable means by which the subject achieves a range of human objects—from styles of physical movement (for example, walking), through modes of emotional being (for example, composure) to kinds of spiritual experience (for example, mystical states) (Asad 2003, 251).

In Asad's view this understanding of *habitus* and its relation to human actions opens up the possibility of thinking of the ways in which embodied practices form a precondition for varieties of religious and secular experience. In a fine explication of Asad's work, Scott comments that for Asad agency cannot be thought of outside of *habitus* (D. Scott 2006). It is the space of sedimented and embodied practices and cultivation of particular sensory abilities. Habitus is "an embodied capacity that is more than physical ability in that it also includes cultivated sensibilities and passions, an orchestration of the senses."

The work of scholars like Asad and Scott alerts us to the problematic assumptions that govern secular modern conceptions of agency as disembodied reflexive reason. They also thereby challenge a particular conception of what constitutes the properly "political" derived from liberal notions of the individual. Asad's notion of *habitus* is a productive opening for thinking of viewer responses to cinema. What kinds of embodied modes of apprehension do spectators bring to the mythological or devotional cinema? What problems does this involved/corporeal mode pose for the liberal conception of rational spectator?

Let me now turn to a study of folk performative traditions in the Telangana regions of Andhra Pradesh in order to see what one possible *habitus* might be that Telugu viewers

bring to the cinema. Even within this example, we will find that the cultivation of embodied dispositions does not preclude the ability to argue over what constitutes proper tradition and the proper way of ritual story-telling. Indeed as Asad remarks, "the old idea that tradition means non-argument and modernity means argument really just won't do any longer." However, he clarifies that "argument is itself interwoven with the body of in its entirety; it always invokes historical bodies, bodies placed within particular traditions, with their potentialities of feeling, of receptivity, and of suspicion (Scott 2006, 288)."

A Lower-Caste Telugu Habitus

Kirthana Thangavelu's study of the painted scrolls used in performing local myths of the lower castes Shudras and untouchable castes in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh presents us with a fascinating example of extant audio-visual traditions of performances other than cinema and electronic media (Thangavelu 1998). She argues, "The paintings represent the rank and status claims of these painters, and they can be read as strident, partisan and ideologically charged charters (Thangavelu 1998, 5)."

During extended story-telling sessions the huge painted scrolls are fixed on stage and gradually and partially unfurled to reveal different visual representations of the episodes being narrated on stage. However the scrolls were not simply faithful illustrations of the story being narrated; rather they followed a logic of their own sometimes simply illustrating, oftentimes augmenting the narrative and in a few instances overwhelming the audience with their sheer spectacular visual power. She argues that "the visual and performed narratives are analogous and complementary discourses; they structure each

other and sustain one another, and yet remain autonomous and independent of each other (Thangavelu 1998, 4)."

Thangavelu's dissertation closely and carefully examines the commissioning and execution of a painted scroll to be used for a performance of the *Madel puranamu*. This puranam was a *jati purana* (a caste purana) that presented the caste genealogy of the washerman caste, a *shudra* lower caste. The performance was commissioned by the local people belonging to this caste. In her study of the viewership practices attending these story-telling sessions, Thangavelu narrates two episodes that are of particular interest to the issues we are discussing. They display the complex ways in which the agency of the female members of the audience witnessing the *Madel puranamu* was forged. While one instance might be straight-forwardly described as their resistance to, and challenging of the performers' sexist remarks about modern women, the second instance is an example of the way in which their religious subjectivity comes to the fore. The oral retelling of an old myth renders it contemporary through many performative practices like the insertion of commentary by the story-tellers on the proceedings of the story and the performative context, sometimes this extends to a commentary on contemporary events. Continuing this tradition, the *Madel puranamu* narrators make several comments about all kinds of things to enliven the proceedings and sustain audience interest. Commenting on women is a favourite topic. On this particular occasion too, the story-tellers digress far from the main story to ridicule at length modern women who wore lipstick and polyester blouses and stood in line for the 11 o'clock film show. Some of the women viewers took offence at this extended, even if funny, tirade against women and demanded angrily that the story-tellers stop this commentary and return to the main story of the *puranamu*

(Thangavelu 1998, 170-175). There is an angry exchange of words with many women taking the offended woman's side and the story tellers trying to justify their comments. After a brief pause in the performance, the narrators were forced to return to the main story. The episode is significant for two reasons. It not only reveals the extent to which improvisation and digression are part of the performance but also the extent of audience participation and that the women were by no means mute and blindly devoted spectators. While the entire performance was seen undoubtedly as a sacred and powerful ritual, it didn't mean that they would not interrupt or challenge it in any way. They took strong objection to unfavourable and sexist remarks made by the performers and actually stalled the show in order to make their displeasure heard.

Among this same group of women, there were going to be some who would be moved to ecstatic possession during the next day of the performance. On the second night of the performance, the narrators set the ground for an important episode namely the birth of the god Veerabhadra that would be narrated the following day. They even requested the audience to come with whatever donations they could afford. On the next day, the unveiling of the Veerabhadra figure was preceded by ritual preparations like burning incense, waving neem leaves and vigorous drumming. The drumming led to the possession of a woman who begins to dance and shriek and she is soon joined by other women who dance and welcome the god on the scroll. When unveiled the Veerabhadra is a spectacular giant figure which enthrals the audience.

Thangavelu argues that this episode demonstrates that:

> …in this tradition of story-telling in Telangana, the viewing experience is not much visual in nature, but rather that it is more constituted by aural,

emotional and corporeal responses as well. People clapped, shouted, whistled and became possessed when Veerabhadra emerged on the scroll, such that the appearance of the deity in the painting becomes coterminous with his presence in the performance (Thangavelu 1998, 179-180).

She states further that for the duration of the performance, "the scroll is a mobile temple in which the deity is enshrined; the story-tellers are the priests who make contact with the sacred in the appropriate narrative and ritual contexts." Jyotindra Jain's recent article on the ways in which religious scrolls and maps are not just representations of sacred places but are themselves able to recreate the space of the shrine and worship also reinforces this argument (J. Jain 2010).

I recount these episodes from Thangavelu's study at length in order to stress that women who dance or become possessed are neither simply blindly superstitious nor does their religiosity makes them slaves to the tradition and immune to the rational world. The same women who dance in ecstasy once the deity makes an appearance during performance are also the ones who take offence to certain remarks about women and urge the performers to return to the traditional story. My own conversations with a range of women viewers also indicates the wide range of viewing practices and dispositions that each of them carries to the cinema theatre. On the question of possessions in theatres too, the responses were varied.

As I have repeatedly emphasized in earlier chapters, the ways in which myths and stories that are part of folk performative traditions and stage plays assume a very different character when they are filmed. Not only does the technology of cinema bring in its own mediations, the space of performance also changes. Unlike the organic community of caste-specific folk performances, the modern anonymous mass public that views stage

plays or the cinema is of a very different nature. Therefore, one cannot look for continuities alone, but must carefully note the ways in which the new technology and new publics also affect the making and viewing of the mythological and devotional films.

Viewing Cinema: An Argumentative Tradition?

In the introduction to this dissertation, I argued that new audio-visual technologies like the gramophone, radio and cinema created new listening and viewing subjects. I also argued that these augmented the space for debates over the existing religious epics and Puranic literature and the ethics of the characters therein. In the print literature produced at least since the late 19th century, there has been an active tradition of producing counter-narratives to hegemonic epic and Puranic literature (Narayana Rao 1991, 1993 & 2000). Moreover, in the context of the women's movement and the dalit-bahujan movements, there has been an active tradition of recovering lower caste myths and re-inscribing hegemonic myths from the perspective of the subaltern characters be they women or lower-caste (Sauda 2000).

I have also noted earlier that piety is not the dominant emotion in the mythological films though there might be moments when the god/star on screen offers himself or herself for worship. In the devotional films, piety is definitely more pronounced. From my own experience of watching mythological films over the years, I do know that seldom are films watched without audiences discussing the relative merits of the particular episodes of the epics chosen for filming, the negative or positive depiction of characters, the

suitability and skill of the actors in playing these roles in addition to such things as the technical skill of the film, the special effects, the costumes and sets, etc.

When I was a child growing up in the town of Vijayawada, I remember for example, how my neighbour had one day gathered us, a bunch of children in our lower-middle class neighbourhood and narrated to us the story of Shakuni, the arch villain of the Mahabharata. The narration of the story was followed by a discussion which was soon joined by many elders who were sitting around. The discussion revolved around how we ought to understand the character of Shakuni. While many knew him to be a wicked character, they all agreed that in this particular narrative, he came across not as a one-dimensional evil character. On the contrary, the story of his family's humiliation at the hands of the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana provides him with a strong and legitimate motive to undermine the Kauravas by pretending to side with them. A whole new layer of complexity was added to the story as well as his character. The discussion then moved to thinking about Krishna's character and whether he ought to be considered divine at all. Only years later, I realised that the entire episode of Shakuni's family history was taken from the film, *Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam*, that my neighbour and others would have seen when it was released or during one of its many reruns in film theatres.

Another instance that I distinctly remember from my childhood was an active discussion among my female relatives about the way in which Kunti and Draupadi were portrayed in a demeaning manner in the film, *Dana Veera Soora Karna*. They were particularly galled by the way in which these two female characters were repeatedly insulted in the film— one for being the wife of five husbands and the other for being an unwed mother and for subsequently abandoning the child out of fear for being censured by society. They

compared this film with earlier films in which the portrayal of these characters was more favorable. They also discussed the language used and the different actors who played these roles in different films. I can recall many such episodes involving family members, neighbors and friends where discussions about films extended from appreciation to criticisms of particular aspects of films.

I will now recount an episode from my teens. One summer evening, my female cousin and I sat in an old run-down theatre in a small town, Kazipet with some other relatives watching a re-run of the film, *Sati Anasuya*. My cousin, also in her teens, and I were already disdainful of several of the standard conventions of Telugu films. We had begun to watch films with a critical view through a selective appreciation of aspects we approved of (mostly music from old films) and passionate criticism of those aspects that we found to be regressive. The portrayal of women as long-suffering wives was one that guaranteed an impassioned diatribe from us against outmoded values and male oppression. On this particular occasion though what remains in my memory is a little exchange on language that we had shared.

Anasuya is the wife of the Sage Gautama and is declared to be the most devout wife in the whole world. The goddesses, Lakshmi, Parvati and Saraswati, wives of the trinity seek to test this claim. They send their husbands, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, to Anasuya in a bid to put her to a test of devotion. The gods disguised as rishis seek hospitality in Gautama and Anasuya's house. At meal time they make a strange request, they say that the rules of their penance require that their hostess serve them meals in a naked state. This is clearly a crisis situation! How was a sati to appear naked before three strange men, even if they were pious rishis! However, Anasuya's powers of *satihood* enable her

to tackle the situation with elan. She transforms the three gods of the world into infants and feeds them by turns in her naked lap. As this crucial scene approached, my cousin leaned towards me and whispered, "Do you know what word they will use to ask her to get naked? They will not say *nagnam* (meaning naked but somehow not appropriate for a scene involving gods and rishis) or *battalu lekunda* (which would be too colloquial and modern sounding). They will use the word, *vivastra* (literally clothes-less)", she said. And sure enough that was the word used. She looked at me triumphantly and I nodded in appreciation. The word had indeed conveyed the gravity required of the situation without offending modern sensibilities.

More recently when I was watching some of these films again for the purpose of this dissertation, an old aunt happened to be visiting. It was the last day of her visit and when she discovered that I had acquired a whole lot of old mythologicals in VCDs and DVDs, she was thrilled! She scolded me for not telling her this as soon as she arrived and sat down to watch *Sri Krishna Tulabharam* with me. I hadn't seen her in such an animated fashion for a long time. She smiled and her body swayed slightly to the tune of the *padyams* (verses) as she recited them along with the actors. She knew all the *padyams* and songs by heart; they were popular from stage plays she had known as a child. She recounted how she had learnt them along with her brothers and they had all enjoyed singing them immensely.

I now turn briefly to the interviews and unstructured conversations that I conducted in Hyderabad specifically for this dissertation. In this set of interviews mainly with women viewers I focused on the question of women viewers and the specific issue of possession

in theatres.[34] Venkatalakshmi is a lower middle class woman in her forties. From the prominent place that a puja corner occupied in the small living room and through my conversation with her, I gathered that she was quite a devout woman. She mentioned how she never ever missed a pilgrimage to Vijayawada Kanakadurga temple during the Dasara festival. During the course of a long chat about mythological and devotional cinema in Telugu, I asked her if she had heard of possessions during film viewings. She replied that not only had she heard of such things but in fact, during a film screening the woman sitting next to her had become possessed. She said that she moved away in fear then. When I asked her what she thought about such occurrences, she replied, "I used to think these things were real, now I have learnt that they are a result of nervous weakness." She said that she never accepts kumkuma offered at shrines in film theatres. The *kumkuma* was too powerful a substance to be collected from anywhere and everywhere. When collected from temples, it is imbued with the *sakti* and grace of the deity. "You never know what pujas are conducted at these theatre shrines." She was most sceptical about these arrangements. Earlier on, when I had questioned her about claims made by actors and film makers about the moral discipline and pious behaviour they claim to have adopted during filmmaking, she said, "*Nishtta* (Discipline) is important—it certainly makes them better actors of such roles. NTR was supposed to have been a very disciplined man." So, Venkatalakshmi was willing to accept that there might be a form of piety that are genuine and effective but was unwilling to grant that the possessions during film screenings were anything but signs of a weak body, a medical problem that she

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[34] Some of the conversations did not move beyond fifteen to twenty minutes but some evolved into really long conversations which gave me many wonderful insights into the ways in which mythologicals and devotionals were watched and related to. I have changed the names of my interviewees.

described as nervous weakness. This ambiguity can be seen as a sign of resistance to according possessions (now associated with lower caste practices) the status of the truly religious. Yet there is more to this resistance than mere caste differences. I think it is also coupled with a modern distrust of the fragmentation and loss of self, of consciousness and surrender to another power, be it a real goddess or the goddess on screen. As we have seen in earlier discussions of Kalpana Ram's work, this was a concern which liberal feminism too had to struggle with.

Another female viewer, Suryakantam, a retired teacher now in her sixties did not dismiss the fact that women can get possessed. She said "my grandmother used to get possessed in real life." Despite this she was sceptical of the veracity of instances of viewers getting possessed in the film theatres. "Too many people are getting possessed nowadays. There are too many swamis and babas. I used to believe in them before, but I don't anymore." Suryakantam had definite opinions about actors who suited roles of gods and goddesses and those who didn't. "NTR as Krishna and Venkateshwara and K.R. Vijaya as the Devi were perfect. You couldn't take your eyes off them. But Ramyakrishna hardly looked like a goddess in *Ammoru*," she said. When I pressed further about what aspect of NTR's or K.R. Vijaya's personality made them suitable for such roles. Like many others I spoke to, she said it was their eyes and the way they carried themselves. "Anyway, the old films were so much better than the ones they make nowadays. The actors were good, they could speak the language well and the songs used to be great!" she concluded.

Speaking of possessions, yet another female viewer, Sriveni remarked that possessions are not merely to be associated with goddess films. A lower middle class woman in her fifties, she said she had heard of possessions *(poonakalu)* during the screening of a

documentary made on a popular cult figure, a female guru called Jillelamudi Amma. She made a further interesting point. She said that in her youth she had heard that snakes were attracted to theatres in which the Hindi film *Nagin* was playing. She had also heard that some people died after watching *Bees Saal Baad*, a Hindi horror film. Sriveni's response to my question made me aware of the broad range of visceral, corporeal responses to film in general, all of which were not enactments of religiosity. She seemed to suggest that it was not only mythological or goddess films that provoked visceral reactions from audiences, but that there were varying degrees of such reactions that were provoked by different genres, horror and documentary included.

When I mentioned shrines within theatre premises, she responded saying that she had indeed seen such shrines and prayed at them as she would at any place where an idol of god was placed—a temple, a home or a public pandal. About the film *Venkateswara Mahatyam*, she said that they had put up idols of the Tirupati god when the film was running, but she hastened to add that this was not merely a publicity gesture designed to boost ticket sales. She said that the film was a huge success as it is and the idols were placed in theatres after the 100th day of its release. Sriveni showed a keen awareness that allegations of false publicity existed and wanted to distinguish this particular film from other films which might have adopted such techniques.

Sumitra Devi was a middle class woman in her early sixties and a writer of short stories for children. She repeatedly stated during the course of our conversation that "in those days people were more religious and god-fearing. "Bhakti and the fear of immoral actions (*papa bheeti*) was far greater in those days." *Daiva bhakti and papa bheeti ekuvaga undevi*". She said "we never referred to gods and goddess without using the honorific. It

was always Parvati Devi *vaccharu*, Ramulavaru *vaccharu* etc. Never *vacchadu or vacchindi*". She continued "we grew up listening to different folk forms like the *hari katha*, *veedhi natakalu* and many songs which were based on themes and episodes from the Ramayana like Seeta's puberty ceremony or Urmila's long sleep".

Referring specifically to the *sati* films, she remarks how as she grew older, she began to question the ethics of good wifehood (*pativrata dharma*) that these films upheld. Sumitra Devi recalled with amusement and horror the stories of *pativratalu* that her mother used to make them read. One was especially horrifying for her: this was the story of a rishi's wife who always kept freshly cooked food ready for her husband at all times of the day for she didn't know when hunger would strike him and she didn't want be caught unprepared and provoke his ire. But that was only half the story. She also walked around naked all day, ready to appease his sexual hunger too when the need arose.

However, Sumitra had a novel interpretation to offer regarding the powers that a sati acquires through her exemplary behaviour. She said we can understand sati power as the powers we can acquire through focus and concentration. "*Kendrikarana sakthi*" she called it. The object of the focus for a sati was the husband. For instance, I always find it difficult to finish a story that I am writing until the deadline is upon me. Similarly, it is hard to finalize a title until the deadline approaches. When I realize there is no more time, I am able to focus my entire being on the work at hand—if not as women we are constantly worried about unfinished domestic chores that we can never focus on our own work." She implied that it did not matter whether the husband was good or bad—he was merely an object of focus for the acquisition of sati powers. Her interpretation was persuasive. It offered a modern, secularized interpretation of the *sati* powers without

dismissing them as mere rubbish or condemning them as a male conspiracy to keep women in their place as good wives.

These brief vignettes that I have presented from my interviews demonstrate that most viewer responses cannot be slotted into two clear-cut positions—those of belief or non-belief, religious or secular-modern. Each of them can be dotted somewhere along the lines that join both positions. As such they are far more complex and ambiguous and vary over time under the impact of different discourses that seek to make them meaningful or signs of backwardness and ignorance.

Debating Disciplines in Popular Culture

In his essay on Asad's work, Scott raises a very significant question about the relationship between the concepts of *tradition* and *genealogy* as they operate in the former's work. He asks, "in what sense or senses are these modes of inquiry compatible with each other? Are they, in fact, mutually antagonistic stances towards moral and social inquiry? Is there a way—a register, perhaps, a discipline, an idiom—in which they can be brought into an explicit and fertile (even if not seamlessly harmonious) dialogue? (D. Scott 2006, 140)" [35] In his response to Scott's article, Asad ponders over this question—"how do I see the *difference* between genealogy and tradition? First, by the way they *share* something: discipline. The latter sustains, elaborates, and sometimes argues over

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[35] Scott then proceeds to think about tragedy as a mode of thinking that will enable a dialogue to emerge between the concepts of genealogy and tradition. Interesting as this line of thought is, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to pursue it.

disciplinary practices; the former inquires into the contingent formation of their

conditions of truthfulness (Asad 2006)."

Drawing on Foucault's work and alluding to Asad's work too on discipline, Partha

Chatterjee has recently proposed a new framework for the study of popular culture

wherein the critical focus ought to be on disciplinary practices rather than underlying

beliefs or concepts. He argues that popular culture ought to be seen as consisting

primarily of practices which are best understood in the framework of disciplines:

> The principal framework within which practices may be described and
> understood is, I propose, that of a *discipline*. A discipline is that set of
> authorized practices by which cultural products are made. It is, as Foucault
> has explained a genealogically assembled set, whose elements may have been
> drawn from a variety of sources. But within an identifiable institutional space
> of cultural production and consumption, a discipline will specify authorities
> and authorized practices, techniques and skills, modes of training, norms of
> excellence, forms of use of cultural products, and judgements of taste
> (Chatterjee 2008, 335).

At the same time he cautions that "the appropriate methods here would not be those of

the old anthropology or studies of folk culture. Rather one has to be more genealogical,

identifying why and how specific elements of disciplinary practice are modified or

abandoned and new ones adopted (Chatterjee 2008, 336)." Hence the following two

sections will use biographies and memoirs of filmmakers and actors as well as interviews

with them to track the debates within the disciplinary field of cinema.

The Force of Cinema: Invoking the Goddess through Sound and Image

In an interview that I conducted with Shyam Prasad Reddy and Kodi Ramakrishna, the producer and director of the film *Ammoru*, Reddy recalled the reason that prompted him to make the film. He said:

> I was in a village once where a lower caste goddess festival was in progress. It was late in the night and the drummers were drumming up a frenzy. All the people present were in a kind of trance and were completely immersed in the experience of the moment. As I sat on a jeep top and watched all this, I thought, can we recreate this experience in the film theatre. I knew that the drumming was going to be crucial to recreating this experience. I didn't want to use the regular drummers who work in film orchestras. So, I brought in some drummers from a village and we tried recording the drumming—but somehow it didn't seem to work in the studio. They were not able to recreate that enthusiasm and magic. So we gave up. Later I booked a sports stadium at night, rigged some overhead mikes and asked the drummers to play in the open at night. Before the drumming they all wanted to drink alcohol to get into the mood. We provided them with drinks and that night they played so well—we recorded nearly four hours of drumming, which we used in bits and pieces during the re-recording of the film.

Reddy's account is interesting for many reasons. The drummer's themselves needed to partially recreate the atmosphere of the festival. Night-time and an open space (not the constricted space of the recording studio) and a body and mind stimulated by alcohol were necessary for them to be able to perform like they do during the festival. This simulation of the festival atmosphere needs to be effective enough to be able to produce a simulacrum of the festival drumming. The ambition of the filmmakers is to reproduce this experience on the screen and in the theatre too. In the 1990s, many theatres in Andhra Pradesh began to equip themselves with the DTS (Digital Theatre Sound) sound system.[36]

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[36] Short films advertised the virtues of this new sound system before the actual film was screened. The ad was a sound film which simulated a door being opened on one end and the sound of footsteps walking

Therefore, while the visual on screen remained in the same space as it was from the beginning of cinema, that is, in front of the viewer, sound now unhinged from the screen travelled all around and created a soundscape within which the viewer was seated. This new technology coupled with practices in the theatre of increasing the levels of volume during song or fight sequences or other crucial dramatic moments, create an altogether different sensory experience for the viewer. Hence, the overwhelming visual special effects scenes in *Ammoru* were matched by a more pervasive soundscape that taps into memories of ritual practice and public religious festivities.

Reddy's emphasis on the aural effects they tried to recreate in the film once again points to the significance of the aural and the particular responses/sensations it seeks to create in the bodies of spectators. Most goddess films seek to recreate a specific moment of possession—the *poonakam* song—as S.V. Srinivas has described in his unpublished work on the devotional. The film narrative is structured in order to include a climactic song that induces a trance or possession in the spectators. The narrative moment is further underscored by the theatre management's arrangements for pacifying women who get possessed. A plate with camphor flame and *kumkum* along with neem leaves all used in goddess rituals are brought in at the anticipated time of the possession and this actually brings about the event that it anticipates. The preparations in some sense provoke the possession.[37] As I have suggested earlier, this is one of the ways in which the viewer is addressed specifically as devotee and an attempt is made both on-screen and off-screen to simulate the ritual context.

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across the space of the theatre to the other end and closing another door. This was intended to demonstrate the way in which sound now travelled around the theatre, literally encircling the viewer.

[37] S.V. Srinivas. "Rendering the Goddess Mobile: The 1990s Devotional Film" pp.17-19 (Unpublished paper)

Screening Mythological and Devotional Films

Perhaps for the first time in the history of Telugu cinema, the film *Sri Venkateswara Mahatyam* (1960) based on the myths of the God at Tirupathi, used an innovative technique during the screening of the film, A papier-mâché replica of the Tirupathi idol was placed within the premises of all theatres screening the film and the viewing of the film was itself offered as a substitute for a visit to the temple town Tirupathi. Regular pujas were conducted before the idol and viewers were encouraged to offer donations to the god. This was certainly a unique practice but soon came to be adopted by film makers and exhibitors of almost all subsequent devotionals and is actively pursued even today. Therefore, a small temporary shrine erected within the theatre premises invites the viewers to first get a darshan of the idol placed there and then to enter the theatre to see the film. Sometimes these shrines have elaborate arrangements like regular puja sessions and a hundi (a collection box for cash offerings by devotees). Some are more routine and perfunctory affairs. I had myself seen several such idols in theatres during the 1980s when I was in my teens. Usually I went to these films with my mother and her female friends or relatives and we always made it a point to stop at these idols and pay our respects to them like most other viewers did. In the interview I described in the previous section, Reddy, the producer of the film *Ammoru* told me how they had commissioned the making of idols that were replicas of the idol in the film and these were sent to theatres all around the state. The money that was collected at these makeshift shrines in the theatres was then donated to the Kanakadurga shrine in the town of Vijayawada. This was clearly an initiative that was one of its kind—earlier efforts seem to have depended

more on the theatre management's initiatives and were therefore more dispersed and

decentralized affairs. Arranging makeshift shrines in theatres was one way of addressing

the spectators as devotees and interpreting the act of film-viewing too as an act of piety. [38]

It is possible to understand this practice merely as publicity technique used by the film

makers to promote the film amongst a religious public. But before reaching such an easily

available explanatory frame of the viewer as consumer of religiosity, I would like to

pause to think about what might be different in the solicitation to pray that would be

different from the solicitation to consume.

Performing Deities and Devotees

In the chapter on the Telugu mythological, I had already noted that the most

distinguishing feature of the mythological actor was his or her ability to "look" the part

and even more importantly to deliver the lengthy and lofty monologues effortlessly and to

enact with the right expressions and gestures the play-back singing of *padyalu* or metrical

verses. Here I want to focus on techniques adopted by individual actors in preparation

for mythological roles. These techniques of performances are repeatedly highlighted

either in writings on cinema or in the publicity campaigns of particular films.

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[38] When I went to watch the devotional film, *Trinetram* in 2003 (made by the director of *Ammoru*, Kodi Ramakrishna) in Sri Mayuri, a theatre in Hyderabad, there was no arrangement of an idol or shrine. The film itself was poorly attended and was eventually declared a flop. On the other hand, when I went to watch *Sri Ramadasu* (2006) in Radhika theatre in Secunderabad there were idols of Rama, Seeta and Lakshmana that were displayed in one corner. However, the people who had come to watch the film paid scant attention to the idols. There were some who folded their hands and approached the idols with respect, others passed them by after a curious glance while some ignored them altogether. I am not sure if it was this particular crowd, the location of the theatre or the film itself that provoked this absent-minded and cursory attention given to the idols. Or perhaps it was too much of a well-worn idea that it did not attract the audiences except the most devout among them. The general decline in the popularity of these genres could also be another reason.

In several biographies of NTR, the biographers tell us of the dietary restrictions that NTR used to adopt as part of his preparation for his mythological roles (Venkata Rao 2000). For example, he would follow a strict vegetarian diet while playing the roles of gods like Rama, Krishna and Venkateswara. While playing the roles of demon/negative characters like Ravana and Duryodhana he would adopt a meat diet in order to build up emotions like anger and cruelty. The contemporary Brahmanical evaluation of vegetarianism as a desirable virtue and the association of undesirable meat-eating with Shudras belie the long history and politics of vegetarianism in India.[39] Nevertheless, for our discussion on performance it is enough to note that there was a dominant belief in the logic of such bodily discipline in the preparation to be an actor. While voice cultivation, physical exercise and proper diet in order to maintain a well-built and fit body are believed to be essential disciplines for modern actors too, what distinguishes actors like NTR and other Telugu actors both of his generation and those that came after, is the belief in the link between diet and mental state and capabilities for performance of certain roles.

Indeed NTR was not the only actor to practice such techniques. It is quite common for actors performing mythological and saintly roles to state that they had been practising various physical disciplines like the adoption of a vegetarian diet, abstinence from smoking and alcohol and a conscious effort to avoid negative emotions like anger, pride, jealousy and envy. The popular actor of the 1940s and 50s, Nagayya (best known for his roles of Telugu saint-devotees like Vemana, Potana and Tyagayya) also recounts such details in his memoirs. Nagaiah speaks about the way in which he trained for the role of

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[39] For an excellent overview of the history and politics of vegetarianism in India, see Parama Roy, "Vegetarianism" Keywords in South Asian Studies ed. Rachel Dwyer. It is this hegemonic conception has led to the informal ban on depicting characters from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as meat-eaters in the Telugu mythologicals. Only demons are shown to be meat-eaters.

the 18th century music saint- composer Tyagayya. He talks in detail about how he

practiced his musical lessons and songs; he also speaks about his belief in god and how

he sought the blessings on different swamis during the course of his life (Nagayya 2004).

This does not mean that all actors followed such regimens or that a general piety and

religiosity pervaded the making of mythologicals or devotional films. There were also

other actors who considered themselves modern and secular and who denied such

practices. They claimed that their performance on screen was nothing but the result of

plain acting! No bodily or mental discipline of a ritual or religious kind are mentioned.

For example, a contemporary of NTR, A. Nageswara Rao (popularly known as ANR),

who was publicly known to be a non-religious person and who was acclaimed for his

roles in social films excelled in his portrayal of a *bhakta* in the film, *Vipra Narayana*. In

his memoirs ANR recounts his conversation on this subject with the well-known director,

K.V. Reddi (Nageswara Rao 2005). When Reddi heard that ANR had been offered the

role of a devotee, he remarked that since the latter was a non-believer, he may not be able

to do justice to the role. ANR says that he argued that one need not actually *be* the role

one portrays on screen. "I pretend to be in love with many women on screen, do I really

love all of them? Is an actor who does evil roles, really evil off-screen too? I will do this

role as I do any other role. This role requires dedication, purity and hard work. It is the

role of a Brahmin who can speak well--with bent shoulders and eyes half-closed, all

expressing the emotion of bhakti." ANR makes an even more interesting observation. He

tells K.V. Reddi, "You have made *Bhakta Potana* with Nagayya. Let us get that film and

watch it together. I will make note of how Nagaiah portrayed the role and learn from it

(Nageswara Rao 2005, 37-38)." Not only is ANR convinced that the external bodily

posture, physical gestures and style of speech as the most important aspects of the performance of a devotee, but he also believed that Nagayya had set the standards for performance of a saint-devotee and emulating this portrayal was the most effective way of playing this role.

The example of ANR gives us a sense of the diversity of views and practices in approaches to acting in mythological and devotional films. It proves that there was or is no authentically "Indian" way of filmmaking. It also shows that seemingly modern and traditional modes coexist in often indistinguishable ways. Moreover, the promotion of piety is viewed with suspicion both by film critics, sections of the media and the audience too. Later by the 1980s and 90s when declarations of piety by makers of devotional films became commonplace and repetitive, they were dismissed by many as mere publicity boasts or even as hypocrisy and plain lies. Even so we would still have to explain and understand why these particular claims and not others are made. Clearly there are some shared ways of thinking and being, sentiments in short that the publicist draws upon in order to persuade the viewing and listening public.

Marketing a Devotional in the new century: *Sri Ramadasu's* Publicity Campaign

Commenting on the manifold increase in budgets spent on publicity for films, Kodi Ramakrishna lamented how nowadays almost the entire film is shown in bits and pieces through publicity.

> When we were young posters were the only form of publicity. We would
> gaze for a long time at the new posters and try to guess the story from the
> stills on the poster. There were many who would build their own story based

> on the poster. There was a lot that was left to the imagination of the viewers and this generated much curiosity and excitement. On the other hand, today, films have to be advertised through radio, TV and the internet besides using older forms of advertisement like print ads, theatrical trailers and wall posters. The trailers for the TV and the internet in particular reveal far too much of the film and rob the viewers of the curiosity and anticipation.

Kodi's views are shared by many in the film industry and it is a fact that cinema has to compete for attention with many other forms of entertainment. Advertising is seen as key to attracting audiences to theatres. This is a question not just of wasteful increase in budgets or spoiling the fun for the viewers but a more structural and systematic change that has been ushered in neo-liberal economics in general. Prasad calls this "a newly triumphant commodity logic (M. M. Prasad 2009)." He concludes his essay on fan bhakti, arguing that this logic threatens the virtual sovereignty formations around stars like Rajnikanth. He says that with *Sivaji* (2007), the star himself is turned into a commodity and that fans are no longer in control of the political surplus created by the star's image. This he describes as the triumph of economics over politics.

A similar logic seems to have been at work in the publicity campaign of the latest devotional, *Sri Ramadasu*. The makers of the film are acutely aware of the difficulties of marketing such a film in the present time of surplus film production and the competition that cinema faces from TV, the internet and piracy of films. Hence, the publicity campaign left no stone unturned as it were. It systematized all previous efforts at marketing devotional films into one coherent campaign.

The function was planned not in Hyderabad, the city where the Telugu film industry is located and where most audio releases are usually held, but in the town of Bhadrachalam,

the temple town associated with the historical figure, Ramadasu.[40] This was followed by a series of publicity campaigns that ensured that the film was constantly in the eye of the media. In April, one of the prominent television channels in Telugu, MAA TV organized a felicitation function for the cast and crew of the film in which a prominent Hindu religious personality, Chinna Jeeyar Swami was invited as a chief guest. The swami spoke at length about the virtues of the film and is said to have blessed the team. The following month another event involving another well-known religious figure was organized. Interestingly this swami Ganapati Sachidananda Swami also had some film links having had produced a couple of small budget devotional films earlier with the purpose of promoting Hindu dharma.[41]

Both these programmes were aimed at emphasizing the fact that the film had the active endorsement and support of a major religious figure and this further buttressed its claim to authenticity and ability to genuinely evoke feelings of devotion and piety. The promotional interviews that MAA TV had planned for the film also made it a point to evoke piety through placing idols of Rama and Sita (in some cases the replicas of the Bhadrachalam idols) in the background while the stars were being interviewed.

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[40] See http://www.idlebrain.com/news/functions/audio-sriramadasu.html for more details. Accessed October 2006

[41] Ganapati Sachidananda Swami himself spoke at the event and said, "For the first time I am participating in film related function. I produced two devotional films in the past to promote our culture. Money has become the guiding force in all professions today. All producers are targeting box office without bothering to produce meaningful and socially responsible films. Awards are being given to unworthy films. Sri Ramadasu is a wonderful film that shows entire Ramayanam in such a short time. K Raghavendra Rao directed this film in such a way that it will be appreciated by the masses of modern times….Sri Ramadasu film offers purification to all human beings….I feel that Nagarjuna should do both commercial films and devotional films in the future." http://www.idlebrain.com/news/functions/sgs-sriramadasu.html Accessed October 2006

Interestingly not too much of an emphasis was placed on the use of computer generated imagery used in the film's climax. Nor was there any emphasis on the film's social critique and value for national regeneration as in the publicity of early nationalist saint films of the 1940s. Another interesting contrast was that no attempt to invite prominent political or social leaders to any of these functions; their opinions were not solicited or highlighted in the way that *Mahatma Vidur* did in its campaign. Here the dominant focus was on Nagarjuna, the star figure and on Ramadasu's piety in the film. As per standard practice, the director, K. Raghavendra Rao stated in the popular press that he was practising an ascetic lifestyle in order to make a sincere devotional film. Many other crew members too made similar statements.

Despite fully participating in this extended "religious" publicity campaign, in individual interviews given to the press however, both the hero of the film, Nagarjuna and the music director, Keeravani both emphatically denied having practiced any form of piety in preparation for the film. Nagarjuna, who is incidentally the son of ANR, refuted reports that he had been writing the Ramakoti during the shooting of the film. [42] Keeravani even made a provocative statement which as far as I know created no particular controversy. Not only did he deny religiosity, he even said that he would work for a pornographic film with the same dedication that he had put in for the devotional film. In the general culture

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[42] Ramakoti literally means "Rama a Ten Million Times". It is a practice that involves writing the name of the god, "Rama" several times over until one completes a million. Writing the Ramakoti is one of the many embodied modes of worship and ritual among Hindus who revere this god. In the film, 1970s film *Andala Ramudu* (Dir: Bapu), for instance, the piety of the character of an old woman is displayed through her habit of writing the Ramakoti. The more recent film, *Godavari* (Dir: Shekhar Kammula, 2007) claims to be inspired by *Andala Ramudu*. Both films are set upon the river Godavari and involve a pilgrimage to the temple town of Bhadrachalam. However, the more interesting aspect for our purposes is that *Godavari's* film crew claimed that they all wrote the Ramakoti during the making of the film. So here we have an instance of the devotional film hero, Nagarjuna disavowing any religiosity and the culturalist film makers of the social film, *Godavari* claiming to embody through their pious actions an authentic Telugu-Hindu tradition and heritage (often glossed as *Telugutanam* or Teluguness).

of religiosity that pervades the publicity, how are we to read these statements? As a honest and sincere admission by these two people? As a defiant assertion of rational thinking in the midst of a superstitious, religious culture? Or as a secular right to hold one's private opinions (and even make them public as such) while participating in a "religious" publicity campaign as per the contract of the film? Perhaps all of these are combined in this instance.

Conclusion

I hope to have made clear by now that my aim in this chapter has not been to look for "resisting" practices of viewership nor to restore "agency" to the viewer as it were. Rather it is to show that different discourses and disciplines seek to create viewers as particular kinds of subjects. This involves not only an appeal to the minds of viewers or to their critical cognitive faculties but endeavours to reinforce or reorient their embodied senses—sentiments, sensibilities and affects of viewers—of their *habitus* in short.

However, as I have argued at the beginning of this chapter, it is within the matrix where different discourses intersect that film audiences are shaped. These discourses include—i) historically constituted embodied modes of appreciating the mythic tradition or relating to the divine, ii) film criticism's secular pedagogy and iii) changing disciplines in film making and film publicity that seek to address film viewers as particular kinds of religious subjects.

Part III: Popular Religion and Culture in the Time of Governmentality

Chapter 5

<u>Cinema and Other Media: Producing the "Reality" of Religion</u>

The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily.

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art: Second Version"[43]

As Benjamin observed, modernity ushered in not only new political forms, but also new audio-visual technologies which revolutionized human perception. While Foucault's work reveals the new political rationality, namely governmentality, which comes into operation in the modern era, Benjamin alerts us to the fact that this operation is made visible in particular ways by film and other media technologies. Therefore, this third and last part of the dissertation proceeds with a double focus—focusing on the one hand, on the significant ways in which the new perceptual apparatus of the cinema and the media partakes in the production of the citizen-devotee and on the other hand, also focusing on the larger political transformations effected by governmentality.

In this chapter, I begin by examining the significance of the use of double endings, voice-overs and documentary footage in many mythological and devotional films. I then proceed to examine the shifting relation between cinema and other media to demonstrate the ways in which they produce the "reality" of popular religion.

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[43] (Benjamin 2008) p.26

Voice-overs, Documentary Footage, Prologues and Epilogues

One of the significant features of many mythological and devotional films in Telugu and Tamil was the introduction of documentary or documentary-style footage of real devotees and of rituals of actual worship at temples in major pilgrimage shrines. Let us take the example of two films discussed in earlier chapters, *Sri Venkateswara Mahatyam* (1960) and *Bhukailas* (1956). Interestingly enough, both these films have two endings. In the first film, one ending provides a narrative solution and closure to the myth of Vishnu's avatara as Venkateswara. The film however, does not end with the completion of the mythical narrative—another ending to the story follows. This second ending is a medley of several short episodes. One of these is a short episode depicting the story of an exemplary devotee played by none other than Nagayya who epitomizes the ideal devotee in Telugu cinema. This is followed by dramatized episodes of modern-day devotees 'on location' at the Tirumala temple. This segment also has the famous play-back singer of Telugu, Ghantasala Venkateswara Rao making an appearance on-screen to perform a song in the temple of the god. Further, there is documentary footage with a voice-over that shows us the important rituals at the temple and also shows us the inauguration of the then, recently, gold-plated exterior of the temple tower called the *Ananda Nilaya Vimanam*. The voice-over seeks to communicate the uniqueness of this event and the awe one is supposed to experience at having an opportunity to see it on screen. It addresses the viewers as devotees to take a *darsan* of the glory of the temple and acquire *punyam* (religious merit).

In the film, *Bhukailas* too, the narrative resolution is followed by another ending which uses documentary footage of the present-day Mahabaleshwar Shiva temple. A voice-over

tells us that the Shiva lingam that Ravana brought down to earth through his rigorous penance is today at the Mahabaleshwar Shiva linga temple near Gokarna beach in Maharashtra. The annual Shivaratri festival, we are told, is celebrated with much gaiety and fervor at this temple. We are shown shots of the festival's procession, and of devotees, mostly common Marathis, walking in the procession. Almost all of them are dressed in dhoti, shirt and overcoat and a Gandhi topi in the typical Marathi style. One might ask, in the case of the film, *Bhukailas*, how is a Telugu audience and possibly a Tamil audience watching the dubbed or remade version of the film to reconcile themselves to the fact of the "Marathiness" of the present-day devotees at Mahabaleshwar? Clearly the style of dressing is very different. But the common heritage of Hindu mythology is supposed to bind the Marathi people and the Telugus and Tamils.

To provide yet another example from this era—*Nagula Chavithi* (1956) too opens with a prologue that shows us contemporary Hindu women engaged in the worship of the Nagadevata, the snake goddess. A voice-over tells us that Nagula Chavithi is a popular festival observed by many women of our country without any distinctions of caste (*"varu-veeru ane bhedam lekunda"*). Having established the "reality" of this popular worship, the film proceeds to narrate the myths and legends associated with this festival.

These voice-overs, documentary footage and prologues and epilogues were features that became conventions that several subsequent devotional films based on myths of particular deities or temples adopted. Another good example of this trend is the film, *Sri Ayyappa Mahatyam* made in the 80s. Ayyappa is the deity at the Sabarimala temple in Kerala and his cult spread widely in Andhra Pradesh in the late 70s and 80s. In this context, the film functions as an introductory guide to those who are newly initiated into

the cult of Ayyappa. Besides dramatizing the myth of Ayyappa, a major part of the narrative is devoted to explicating the significance of each ritual associated with the worship of this deity and as part of this explication we are shown extensive footage of the annual Makara Sankranthi rituals at the Sabarimala temple. This footage shows the well-known Telugu film star of the 80s, Krishnam Raju engaged in worship. Indeed, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the popularity that the cult acquired in Andhra Pradesh among people belonging to all castes has a great deal to do with the films that made the deity and the cult familiar to the Telugu people. During the late eighties and the nineties too, watching these films in theatres or on video was quite a common practice among those who undertook the 'Ayyappa deeksha'. [44] As one video store owner in Gandhinagar, Hyderabad told me these films are in great demand during the *deeksha* (the season of penance). Many of the devotional songs that are publicly broadcast during this season are also those drawn from Ayyappa films or even more interestingly, there are songs consisting of devotional lyrics written to the tunes of popular film songs. I shall be discussing cinema's function as an aural and visual archive in greater detail in the following section. The Tamil film, *Devi Mahatyam,* dubbed into Telugu with the same name, too begins with a song that narrates the story of the Melmaruvattur Adi-sakti shrine in Tamilnadu and the myth behind the temple's establishment. The song is accompanied by visuals that combine documentary footage of the temple and its devotees engaged in various rituals with dramatized sequences of the myth itself.

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[44] The Ayyappa *deeksha* is an annual ritual penance undertaken by men of all ages and a small number of pre-puberty girls. The penance includes several bodily and mental disciplines like dressing in black, wearing the ayyappa *mala*, abstainence from meat-eating, alcohol and sex, cold water bathing, sleeping on the floor, walking bare-footed and restraining baser emotions like hatred, jealousy, anger etc. The interesting fact to be noted with regard to the Ayyappa *deeksha* in Andhra Pradesh is that in recent times, it has proliferated into the poorest of classes and the OBC and dalit castes as well.

How might we explain the use of these voice-overs, documentary footage and the supplementary beginnings and endings? One function appears to be the production of a 'reality effect'; it produces a concrete 'thereness' of the temples and devotees. It seeks to persuade us that the citizens of this country are heirs to a rich heritage of myths and traditions and that the citizens themselves are aware and mindful of this heritage. There is also another related function which is to stitch the film's mythic narratives into nation time and the time of History. Its function is to say "It was like that then, this is how it is now!" (*appudu ala vundedi, ippudu ila vundi* as one film-goer remarked to me). It aims to establish the 'presentness' or the 'here-now' of the past. The footage of actual devotees seeks to convince us that the myths are not merely myths—they have left material traces behind in the form of temples, customs and embodied practices of worship and ritual. Film can now capture the 'truth' of their existence. The images of devotees engaged in prayer, worship and ritual are there as evidence of a Hindu culture that spans the length and breadth of the country. Images of thronging masses of devotees at temples and at festivities are proof of the continuous, unbroken living tradition. Therefore, these films are not merely re-producing or re-presenting a pre-existing reality—they actively produce it.

Drawing on Benjamin, theorists like Paul Virilio and Susan Buck-Morss have expanded the idea that it was only with cinema that certain kinds of perception became possible (Buck-Morss, The Cinema Screen as Prosthesis of Perception: A Historical Account 1994). Using examples like the war, street demonstrations and the city, these theorists argue that the screen was a key prosthetic perceptual apparatus for apprehending the important phenomenon of the 'mass', of 'crowds'.

> Even more than the civil war newsreels of 1918-21, Eisenstein's feature films—*Strike, October, Battleship Potemkin*—gave an experience of the mass that became "characteristic of the era". Against initial resistance of audiences not yet used to the new cinematic prosthesis, Eisenstein tried to make visible such abstract realities as capital, class oppression, and most especially, the mass as the collective agent of the new historical events. The particular characteristics of the screen as a cognitive organ enabled audiences not only to "see" this new collective protagonist, but (through eidetic reduction) to "see" the idea of the unity of the revolutionary people, the collective sovereignty of the masses, the idea of the international solidarity, the idea of the revolution itself (Buck-Morss 1994, 52).

But the possibilities opened up by the cinema and the mass media are not those that will always work in the cause of the revolution as even Benjamin knew. As he famously remarked, film gives the masses a means of self-expression but does not secure their right to overturn existing property relations. All the same, what Benjamin and following him Buck-Morss have demonstrated is that in our times, the mass media as prosthetic perceptual apparatus produce a certain kind of reality which can perform different ideological tasks or produce new discourses in different historical contexts. In the Indian context and in the specific instance of the Telugu films that I discuss cinema performs an entirely different task from that of Russian film in the beginning of the twentieth century. Telugu cinema enables the production of a different collectivity, a different mass—that a religious public and the individual figure of the citizen-devotee.

Commenting on Godard's film series, *Histories du Cinema* on history of the 20th century, both Buck-Morss and Seremetakis have remarked upon the way in which Godard is able to show that the perception of history in our times is enabled by the cinema screen. "The event of each cinema frame and the visual framing of each historical event have become almost indivisible…the perception of history is the history of perception (Seremetakis 1994)." Given the wide popularity of films and images from films, it may not be an

exaggeration to say that they form the unconscious collective memory for people.

Therefore, for a majority of Telugu people cinema functions as an archive of sounds and

images that aids the process of memorializing history, tradition and myth. And for most

Telugu people the cinema has enabled particular kinds of cultivation of the ear and the

eye that are now attuned to recognizing certain images and sounds as constituting religion

and tradition.

This is most dramatically exemplified in a song sequence from a social film of the sixties,

Manchi Manasulu. The protagonist of the film takes his blind wife on a tour of the Hampi

ruins where the famous Vijayanagara empire had flourished in the medieval period. He

sings a song describing the scene to his wife who being blind cannot see the ruins with

her own eyes. As the song describes the emperor of Vijayanagara, Krishna Devaraya, the

film's audience are shown a clipping from the historical film *Tenali Ramakrishna (1956)*

in which NTR had starred as the legendary king. This is a striking instance (perhaps for

the first time) of the use of cinema as readily available illustrative material. The

illustration soon acquires the status of evidentiary material. In the absence of photographs

and footage from the pre-technological fifteenth century, films that recreate that era now

can stand in that place!

 More recent developments in the field of media have produced newer modes of

perception and newer circuits through which images and sounds travel and acquire

meaning. It is as if the real crowds that appear in the devotional films (examples of which

I have discussed in the earlier section) find a new habitation on the pages of regional

newspapers and an even greater positivity on the screens of regional television channels.

In the following sections I will discuss the complex circuits of citation, relay and

exchange between Telugu cinema and the Telugu print and electronic media that combine to produce the citizen-devotee.

Intertexuality between Cinema and other Media: A Shifting Relationship

Devotees as a category of listeners had come into being from the early days of public broadcasting in India. In the decades from the fifties to the eighties which were the decades when the state radio, All India Radio and the state TV, Doordarshan dominated the electronic media scene in India, there was a brief reporting of religious events and there were programs that specifically catered to the devout among the listeners and viewers. This meant that there were assigned slots for religious programming just as there were programs for special segments of the listeners and viewers like women, children, farmers, workers, army personnel, music lovers and so on. And the celebration of major pan-Indian religious festivals was reported in the news usually with a brief statement, "People celebrated Diwali (or Dussera or Christmas) with traditional gaiety and fervor." Besides this, there were special slots usually in the mornings for devotional music. *Bhakti Ranjani*, the popular devotional song program that is being broadcast since the sixties on the AIR Vividh Bharathi stations in Andhra Pradesh features devotional songs taken from films. In what is perhaps a unique event in the history of broadcasting in India, the AIR station in AP has been broadcasting live the annual ritual wedding of the deities, Rama and Seeta as part of the Sri Ramanavami celebrations from the Bhadrachalam temple. From today's perspective this may not seem so unique given the

extensive coverage of all big and small festivals in the state by the print media and

satellite TV channels.[45]

The Telugu Media: A Different History

Readers more familiar with north Indian politics and the debates around communalism

and Hindu nationalism might wonder why that discussion hasn't figured so far in my

exploration of religion and the media. Let me briefly discuss one work that has dealt with

this topic to show the difference between the Hindutva moment and the history that I am

presenting. Arvind Rajagopal's important work, aptly titled *Politics after Television*,

reveals how the new visual regime that television produced and circulated came to be

harnessed by the discourse of Hindutva to further its own agendas of anti-Muslim politics

in north India (Rajagopal 2001). Central to this process, he argues, was the telecast of the

mythological epic serial, Ramayana on Doordarshan TV. He remarks,

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[45] Since the early eighties, there have been some interesting developments in the field of print media in Telugu which brought the local and regional news into focus in a new and resolute manner. The newspaper, *Eenadu* founded by Ramoji Rao in 1974 was a pioneer in this respect. This newspaper distinguished itself by assigning equal importance both to news at the national/international as well as regional levels; in what was unusual for the time, it made regional news the subject of front page headlines and of editorials too. In 1989, *Eenadu* for the first time introduced district supplements called "minis" which provided readers detailed reports of events in their neighbourhoods. This was a trend that other Telugu newspapers too soon followed. This decade also saw the introduction of special supplements for different segments of the readers—women, students, children etc. More local news meant that more local events including festivals and religious events too now received media attention. A parallel growth in the field of electronic media in the form of the cable television since the early nineties encouraged local cable operators in the cities and towns of AP to record and locally telecast local events like the Vinayaka Chaturthi celebrations. This shift of focus to the local and the regional was to have many more spin-off effects in the field of electronic media too. However, one thing that I would like to note right away is that the shift on the local and regional did not mean that the nation did not function as a master frame, it continued to do so but in less obvious ways. Further, this did not also mean that the voices on the margins and anti-state voices could be heard better. The private print and electronic media despite the dramatic increase in numbers, continue to now be owned and dominated by three or four dominant castes of AP—kamma, reddy, raju and velama. For more details of the daily *Eenadu's* rise, see (Maheswari 1999)

> In arguing that Hindu nationalism's recent salience depended on and worked itself out through the media, I neither uncover nor confirm any simple causal mechanisms of media effect. Instead, I argue that the media re-shape the context in which politics is conceived, enacted and understood. Hindu nationalism represented an attempt to fashion a Hindu public within the nexus of market reforms and the expansion of communications, rather than religious reaction as such (Rajagopal 2001, 1).

Focusing on the late eighties and the early nineties in India, Rajagopal's work is instructive in so far as it reveals the links between the Hindi public sphere, the television dominated by the nationalist Hindi-centric Doordarshan and the rise of Hindutva politics. The Ram *bhakta*-citizen that the Hindutva discourse sought to address is certainly one manifestation of the citizen-devotee figure, however, this particular history should not obscure other genealogies of the citizen-devotee nor does the discourse of Hindutva exhaust other potentialities that exist elsewhere in other parts of the country. South Indian politics and the Telugu cultural politics in particular tell a different story. This should not be taken to mean that the South India has somehow escaped the influence of the BJP and its Hindutva agenda. As my own analysis of some recent Telugu films in Chapter 2 shows this is hardly the case. Nevertheless, a focus on Telugu cinema and media will produce a narrative that is different from Rajagopal's for two main reasons—firstly, my work focuses on Telugu cinema from the 50s onwards well before the period of the rise and decline of Doordarshan. This chapter also focuses on the developments in Telugu print and electronic media after the decline of Doordarshan which include the rise of regional, privately owned TV channels. During the period which Rajagopal analyses, Doordarshan did enjoy a monopoly over television and a tremendous reach forcing the majority of the Indian population to watch Hindi programs relegating their own languages to regional status. However, we can now see that this period of monopoly was a brief one and declined rapidly once the cable and satellite private TV channels entered

the fray. Once other language channels started operations, they could tap into and reconnect with the pre-existing collective cultural knowledges of those languages including literature, film and news media. Therefore, if my narrative of Telugu cinema and media appear to be uninterrupted by the national Hindi TV or radio it is because the effort here is to present a different and hitherto under-researched history. Secondly my account differs from Rajagopal's narrative in so far as he does not engage with the Dalit-Bahujan movement's challenge to the right wing Hindutva and to liberal secularism as well. This is another constitutive context within which the new Telugu citizen-devotee is forged.

The After-life of Mythological and Devotional Cinema as Audio-visual Archive

All India Radio and Doordarshan had pioneered the custom of drawing on cinema for programming content—hence the proliferation of film-based programs in All India Radio and Doordarshan and even privately owned TV channels once they entered the fray. A good part of television programming continues to consist of film songs, film advertisements, clips of comic scenes, interviews with film personalities interspersed with clips from their films, singing competitions that feature film songs and the list could go on. In keeping with this trend, radio programmers broadcast related devotional songs from films on particular festival days. For example, all the songs related to Shiva will be broadcast on Shivaratri day, TV channels telecast films that feature the myths of Shiva. This practice has been adopted by privately owned channels too. As a middle-class child growing up in the seventies and eighties and as one whose family listened to the radio a

great deal, I remember how certain film songs were inextricably tied to my memory of certain festivals. The Ramanavami festival was not complete without listening to the song, 'Ramuni Avataram' from the film, *Bhukailas* or 'Seetaramuni Kalyanam chutama rarandi' from Bapu's film, *Sampoorna Ramayanam.*

The 2000s have witnessed the explosive growth of 24-hour satellite channels including some channels devoted exclusively to religion in all Indian languages. In the period, 2008-9 around fifteen new channels started functioning in Telugu taking the current number of channels to thirty! This has meant that there is an even greater demand for material that could be used as content for programming in these channels. Therefore, even exclusive devotional channels like Sri Venkateswara Bhakti Channel (SVBC) and Bhakti TV turn to material from cinema either by telecasting mythological and devotional films or through remaking some popular films as TV series.

But this traffic between the cinema and media has not been only a one way affair. As cinema came to serve as an archive that media could draw from to create its own content, the production and consumption of cinema could not remain unaffected. Some of the themes that were material for low-budget women's films, devotional films, horror films have all now surfaced as television serials leading to the death of these genres in cinema. Furthermore, the burden of documenting the reality of religion and religious practice that was part of the devotional films was taken on by television. For example, programs that take viewers on a journey to different well-known and also little-known pilgrimage sites, introduce them to the local history and the practices of the temple are now produced by many channels. *Mana Punya Kshetralu* (Our Sacred Sites) telecast on MAA TV and *Teertha Yatra* on ETV2 (sponsored by Chandana Brothers, a major clothing business) are

merely two examples of the many programs with similar themes in different channels. Interestingly enough, MAA TV also presently telecasts a program called 'Mana Grama Devatalu' (Our Village Goddesses) which focuses on local goddesses from even little known villages in different parts of Andhra Pradesh. This serious focus on village goddesses is again a new development. Besides these, many channels including exclusive news channels have started extensively covering many religious festivals, often presenting a live telecast of events from different cities and towns such as the Vinayaka Chaturthi celebrations and Bonalu celebrations in the capital city of Hyderabad, the Ramanavami celebrations from Bhadrachalam, the Brahmotsavam and other events from Tirupati. Most channels have a morning slot devoted to discourses by religious leaders. All these developments could be one of the reasons for hastening the death of this genre of devotional films that had in any case become poorly crafted B movies with disconnected episodes that were loosely strung together.

As I have tried to show, the identification of devotees as a segment of cinema audience and the consumers of media had initially led to genre divisions in cinema and later to program segmentation in the media with different sections of the programming catering to the specific demands of specific groups. This process seemed to have reached its apotheosis in the creation of TV and radio channels that cater specifically to particular segments of media consumers. So, if AIR devoted an hour everyday for bhakti, today's Telugu TV viewer can tune into a 24-hour exclusive religious channel. This logic of genre differentiation and audience segmentation shares much with the way in which the market tries to profile and segment consumer groups so that it can better exploit their market potential. Indeed there is considerable overlap and synergy between the logic of

the government by the state, the liberal privileging of individual freedom from community, and the logic of the market. All believe in the structural differentiation of different spheres and would like to identify and slot populations as specific groups that they can address. So the citizen-devotee can be mobilized as an apolitical consumer as much as she can be mobilized as a political subject. One needs to only note the increased commercial activity during festival time be it Hindu, Muslim or Christian festivals. Patronage by business establishments at the local level and corporate sponsorship of festivities and religious rituals is a well-established practice too. Advertising too seeks to address the consumers specifically as devotees and tries to promote the buying or gifting of clothes, jewels and other goods as an integral part of the religious culture.[46]

This important caveat notwithstanding there is enough evidence in the cultural politics of contemporary Andhra Pradesh to indicate that there are political challenges posed by new citizen-devotee publics to the existing hegemonic formations. Therefore, in the next chapter I examine in detail the governmentalization of religion as well as contestations to this process by providing three examples of new counter- publics.

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[46] Witness for instance the recent promotion of the time of 'Akshaya Trithiya' in the Hindu calendar as an auspicious occasion to purchase gold by businesses of gold and jewellery. It is not as if 'Akshaya Trithiya' did not exist before—obviously it did and some sections of the Hindus in India would no doubt have believed this to be an occasion to buy gold. But what advertising seeks to do is to present it as an all-India/all-Hindu belief and tradition. It urges the new rich professional class in India to partake of this tradition. The point being made is that the actions of different actors and different networks can activate or set into motion different possibilities.

Chapter 6

<u>Beyond Cinema: New Citizen-Devotee Publics</u>

'Government' did not refer only to political structures or to the management
of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or
of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of
communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately
constituted forms of political or economic subjection, but also modes of
action, more or less considered and calculated, which were destined to act
upon the possibilities of action of other people.

Foucault, "The Subject and Power"[1]

A secular state is not one characterized by religious indifference, or rational
ethics—or political toleration. It is a complex arrangement of legal reasoning,
moral practice, and political authority.

Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* [2]

In the chapters of Part 1 and 2 of this dissertation I explored the complex relationship

between popular cinema, religion and politics in South India through an analysis of the

mythological and devotional genres in Telugu cinema. More specifically, I tried to

demonstrate the ways in which the cinematic texts—through their narratives and modes

of address—produce the figure of the citizen-devotee both on screen through the creation

of representative figures and off-screen in its address of the viewers as citizens and

devotees.

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[1] (Foucault 1982, 790)

[2] (Asad 2003, 255)

In the preceding chapter, I considered the wider provenance of the figure of the citizen-devotee through linking the discourse of cinema with other popular media—print, radio and television which in conjunction with the governmentalization of religion produce this new mode of subjectivity, namely that of the citizen-devotee.[3] This chapter argues that the governmentality not only defines the properly religious and circumscribes the limits of religion in social and political life but also produces subjects as devotees through governing their conduct and creating the conditions within which they can act meaningfully and effectively. As we have seen cinema and the news media play a major role in this process. The devotee is no longer simply a devotee, rather she is refigured as devotee who is also the citizen of a particular nation by virtue of which she not only enjoys the right to religion as it were, but is also shaped by particular conceptions of history, heritage and tradition.

However, as Foucault himself observes, governmentality is the encounter between the technologies of domination and those of the self (Foucault 1997). In the Indian context, it is not individual selves but collective selves like caste or community groups that have challenged the governmental technologies of domination. While the state and other dominant actors/institutions seek to govern people as devotees or religious subjects in particular ways, there are also demands that these subjects as individuals or groups do make in a representative democracy. Therefore, this chapter tells the story of the ways in which different groups and castes of people inhabit this category of citizen-devotees not always to "live the norm" but also to challenge the dominant conception of this figure, to expand its limits and at times to over-turn it. I discuss three examples of such 'counter-

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[3] On Foucault's idea of governmentality see (Foucault 1991b) and (Gordon 1991)

practice' in contemporary Andhra Pradesh focusing also on the way in which the media is harnessed towards this end. The "counter-conducts" of the subaltern castes and groups demand our attention as much as the governmental discourse does because they provide a deeper and more productive understanding of the field in which the state and its citizens and population groups operate (Gordon 1991). The first example I analyze is the new visibility gained by the lower-caste Bonalu festival in the nineties. It illustrates a process of de-sanskritization and assertion of a regional Telangana and dalit-bahujan identity within the broad paradigm of Hinduism. The second example I discuss reveals a parallel but different politics at work. A reformist program called *Dalita Govindam* was undertaken by the administration of a major Hindu temple in Andhra Pradesh to integrate dalits and tribal communities into the mainstream Hindu fold. The strong opposition to this program by dalit parties and intellectuals and the resulting controversy introduce a dissonance in the homogenous narrative that cinema, media and the state construct of the Hindu citizen-devotee. The third example is taken from the new mythologies of lower caste Muslims being constructed by a new literary movement called *Muslimvada Sahityam* (Muslimist literature). By exploring the embodied traditions shared by lower caste Hindus, dalits and lower caste Muslims, this literature introduces the category of caste to disrupt majoritarian conceptions of religious communities. What all these examples do is to return the supposedly religious and cultural to a broader realm that includes the social and the political.

Religion in the Time of Governmentality

As several scholars of South Asia have recently argued religion as a separate realm of thought and practice emerges in India only during the modern colonial era.[4] This meant that religion was isolated as an entity, a phenomenon that could be conceptually and practically separated from superstitious practices on the one hand, and from the economic and political domains of the society on the other. Colonial governmentality not only defines the properly religious and circumscribes the limits of religion in social and political life but also produces subjects as devotees through governing their conduct and creating the conditions within which they can meaningfully and effectively act (D. Scott 1999).[5] This is a project that the independent nation-state does not abandon but carries forward with a supposedly more legitimate authority (Chatterjee 1998). Note that this argument is simply not the conventional story of a gradual secularization and modernization where the social and political realms free themselves from the stranglehold of religion, and whereby modern citizens are forged. Rather this is an argument about the definition and delimitation of religion, and of secularism as an arrangement of power (Asad 1993) & (2003).

In other words, the religious mode of being is now actively mediated and regulated by the state. The mediation of the state does not simply refer to the conferral of the right to religion and culture upon its citizens, although that too is an important shift marked by the entry of a discourse of rights into the field of the 'religious' as it were. However, as Foucault and the scholars who draw upon his work remind us we should look beyond the

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[4] See (Appadurai 1981), (Dirks 2001), (Van der Veer 2001), (Presler (1987) 2008), (Mani 1998) among many others.

[5] See in particular the chapters, "Colonial Governmentality" and "Religion and Civil Society".

conferral and invocation of a right to religion and culture, to investigate "the conduct of conduct" that the state undertakes. Both the colonial and the post-colonial state have put in a great deal of effort into defining and demarcating religion, tradition and custom, and in abolishing, abandoning or reforming its more objectionable aspects. Thereby modern governmentality has produced citizen-devotees whose rights it protects; whose welfare it administers and whose conduct it regulates.

Commenting on the importance of cultivating certain attributes in the historical formation of the citizen figure, David Burchell has argued that contemporary debates about citizenship have not adequately recognized the fact that the citizen is a social and historical creation that is the result both of governmental disciplines as well as techniques of the self. He says that Foucault's later work attempted to demonstrate the work of both these disciplines (Burchell 1995).

Let me illustrate what I have been saying thus far with the help of a news report taken from one of the oldest and widely read newspapers in South India.

THE HINDU

Date:30/07/2002

'Bonalu' festival draws huge crowds in Secunderabad

By Our Staff Reporter

HYDERABAD July 29. The week-long `Bonalu' festival in the Secunderabad area concluded on Monday with the devotees thronging the Sri Ujjaini Mahankali and other

`matha' temples. Women turned out in their best silks and offered `Bonalu' to the Goddess on Sunday.

Monday's highlight was the visit to the Mahankali temple by the Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, and `rangam' predictions of the events during the coming months by a young woman, Swaroopa.

Mr. Naidu performed pooja and was blessed by the temple priest with a "shadagopam". He was accompanied by the Minister for Tourism, T. Srinivas Yadav, Alladi P.Rajkumar, MP, several legislators from the City, TDP corporators and officials of the Endowments Department.

After the `rangam', the icon of the Goddess was taken out in a procession on a caparisoned elephant. The procession went round the General Bazar, R.P. Road and other adjoining areas.

Devotees in large numbers from the City and the Telangana districts visited the Mahankali temple on Sunday right from the morning. There were long queues before the temple, with the police and representatives of the voluntary agencies, including the Deccan Manava Seva Samithi, regulating their movement.

`Pothrajus' and `ghatams' accompanied by `teenmar' beat attracted the attention of the residents on Sunday and Monday. The devotees also visited various `matha' temples in the Ramgopalpet, Pan Bazar, R.P.Road and M.G.Road areas, which wore a festive look. Sellers of toys and items which appeal to children had a field day trying to attract visitors, mainly women and kids.

A feature of this year's festival was the conduct of a medical camp for the benefit of the devotees with the support of the Lions Club of Secunderabad-Good Samaritans and the involvement of the corporators of the Ramgopalpet and Ranigunj divisions.

Members of the Temple Trust Board led by P.Lakshminarayana, and the Executive Officer, K. Lakshmi, supervised the arrangements for the peaceful and smooth conduct of the `Bonalu' with the help of the police and officials of the Secunderabad division of the MCH, the Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board and the AP Transco.

This is a fairly typical news report for readers of Indian newspapers because it has been customary for the Indian media to report the celebration of festivals and other religious events.[6] However, there are some significant points that we need to note in the report. The primary aim of the report is to inform us that Bonalu was celebrated and that several people participated in the festivities. But all of those who were reported present were not devotees. The newspaper reports the participation of the Chief Minister of the state of Andhra Pradesh. It also records the presence of different wings of the state and administration that are there to ensure the smooth conduct of the festival—the police to ensure peace and calm; voluntary agencies to ensure the health and welfare of the devotees; and officials of the sanitary and electricity departments to ensure that all required arrangements are made.

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[6] This report is from 2002 but almost the same kinds of reports were written through the late nineties and the 2000s. In that sense, it is a typical one and the major details would remain the same in the reporting of most other Hindu festivals. However, the report is atypical in another sense. This is to say that the particular festival, Bonalu, was itself not the focus of this kind of media or political attention before the nineties. I discuss this aspect in greater detail in the latter part of the paper.

Indian secularism was not about separating religion and politics as much as regulating this relationship in particular ways. Therefore while there is no established religion of the state, this has not meant the denial or discouragement of religious practice in public. Rather, there has been a governmentalization of religion that is exemplified by the active intervention of the state and non-state actors in the definition and delimitation of what constitutes religion and the organization of the public and private conduct of religion. Both the colonial state and nationalist reformers were engaged in many efforts on governing the conduct of devotees and the practice of religion. Firstly, as agents of reform they have worked towards enforcement of temple entry for dalits; abolition of practices like the *sati* or the *devadasi* tradition; prohibition of animal and bird sacrifices in temple precincts to name a few. Secondly, as managers and administrators of public religious events they seek to provide facilities for devotees and ensure that the festive events and rituals proceed smoothly and also to ensure there are no accidents or violent incidents of any kind.

It can be argued then that modern governmental rationality in India has identified devotees as a population group who are the target of welfare and governmental control and policy. As Foucault has remarked, viewed as a population group, they are not conceived as liberal citizens but crowds that need to be controlled and regulated. And often it is pictures of crowds of devotees that one confronts in news photography in print and in reportage in the electronic media. These crowds are seen as an affirmation of the persistence of devotion and faith in India even in these modern times. But they also raise the specter of several calamities—outbreaks of epidemics, imminent accidents, unruly behavior and even violence in the form of communal riots. Hence, it is not unusual rather

it has become mandatory for the media to report that there were no "untoward" incidents after each and every religious festival or event.

The mediatized citizen-devotee and the people's representative

As I hope to have demonstrated by now that though cinema provides its most vivid initial representation, the figure of the citizen-devotee has a much larger provenance in the print and electronic media. To borrow a phrase from Chris Pinney's recent work, there is an "inter-ocularity" that exists between cinema and the news media and aids the recognition of this figure. In other words they render this figure legible. What is more, this legibility also confers legitimacy to this figure. This process of rendering legible and legitimate happens through two overlapping mediations—one, through the sheer reporting/recording of current religious practice and actually existing devotees by the media which we have discussed in earlier chapters; and two, through its mediation by a representative figure whose presence is also recorded by the media through news reports and news photographs.

To go back to the news report, the presence of the government officials is recorded along with that of politicians, most notably the presence of the state's chief minister of that time, N. Chandra Babu Naidu. While the officials perform a disciplining function, the chief minister performs an authorizing function. The politicians in AP today not only greet people on the occasion of festivals but also participate in the celebrations in a visible manner. So a typical newspaper photograph or news report will be that of x, y or z

minister or politician engaged in worship or participating in the festival rituals. Hindu

politicians will not only appear as engaging in worship at Hindu temples or festivals but

also often with a Muslim topi at Id celebrations.[7] These photographs and news reports

convey to us that the state and its representatives recognize the right of the citizens to

their beliefs and will therefore actively facilitate and participate in them. As a

representative the politician demonstrates to the people that he shares their culture and

will publicly acknowledge it. It is quite possible to argue that there is nothing new in the

presence of people's representatives at religious functions; rather the tradition is a throw-

back to pre-colonial or feudal times when the ruler or upper caste landlord patronized the

local temple and whose presence was acknowledged ritually. As patron he was also

entitled to special honors and was no ordinary devotee but a representative of

sovereignty. Even though we might be tempted to argue that these earlier logics seem to

be at work even today, a convincing case can be made to show that although elements

from an early political formation are used or borrowed, these old practices are now

inserted into the new grammars of secular democracy and hence set in motion different

dynamics. But this was not always the case.

In a recent article, the political scientist, Gurupreet Mahajan recounts an early

disagreement between the first Prime Minister and the first President of independent

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[7] Y.S. Rajasekhar Reddy, the chief minister of the state until 2009 when he died in a sudden air accident, is a Christian but curiously this is an identity that he does not project publicly. Therefore, he participates in all the Hindu rituals as head of the state. It is as if his caste status as Reddy (a dominant caste in the state) is more important than his Christian identity which he neither denies nor affirms publicly. At the same time, he has also initiated a subsidy for Christian pilgrims to visit Jerusalem/Bethlehem. The Dalita Govindam program too was launched under his rule. And his son-in-law is a reputed Christian pastor whose much-publicized and criticized religious meetings are believed to have been instrumental in gathering the support of all the Christians in the state for Rajasekhar Reddy in the recent elections. The dynamics of caste and minority religious identity in the state of AP and the curious case of YSR, a Reddy Christian require a separate study in themselves. I intend to take this up elsewhere as it is beyond the scope of this chapter.

India, Nehru and Rajendra Prasad on this matter (Mahajan 2008). The disagreement concerned the latter's proposal to appear in the public celebrations of the reconstructed Somnath temple. In many ways it was indexical of yet another aspect of the unresolved debate over the nature of Indian secularism and presented two opposing views on the matter. Nehru was opposed to a member of the cabinet being publicly associated with a religious event. Therefore, while most Indians are familiar with Nehru's photographs with steel plant workers, or at giant dams or with tribals of the Northeast, to the best of my knowledge, there is no public photograph of him in a place of worship or at a religious event. That was his understanding of what it meant to be secular—a mistrust and a distancing from all things religious. Rajendra Prasad however did not share these views of Nehru. As representative of the people and a citizen himself, he saw nothing wrong in publicly identifying with a religious event which after all reflected the people's culture. Besides, Somnath was a powerful symbol in the newly nationalized Hindu history and therefore was worthy of the President's attention (Davis 1999).

It is part of my argument that much has changed since Nehru's and Prasad's time. Our thinking and understanding regarding secularism too has undergone a change. The change is not merely greater acceptance of religion or religious culture or any simple rejection of secular ideals by the Indian state and its political elites. Rather there is now a new understanding of the absolute centrality of the question of caste to any rethinking of secularism in India. Although, the more commonsensical understanding of secularism leads us to think of the tolerance between different religious communities, but in the case of India, the issue of caste complicates matters in many unexpected ways (Dirks 2001). There have been some useful efforts at understanding of the dynamics of caste in the

shaping of the discourses of secularism and communalism (Dhareshwar 1993), (D. Menon 2006), (Tejani 2007). Secularism in India has not only meant the separation of state and religion but of the effort to create a transcendent social and political subject who will be free of religion and caste. At the same time, it ought to be remembered that this liberal secular aspiration was conditioned by the particular ways in which the new Indian nation-state came into being. As Tejani has persuasively argued it did so through the constitution of Hinduism as a majority religion (that was now reformed to include the backward castes and dalits), and with other religions like Islam and Christianity as minority religions to whom toleration would be extended. This process formed the conceptual pre-conditions for the emergence of Indian secularism.

In the nineties i.e in the post-Mandal and post-Hindutva years, there was a breakdown of the consensus around this Nehruvian secular project. The assertion of dalit-bahujan groups both in the cultural and political arenas challenged this idea of secularism and modernity by forcefully articulating the question of caste. They demonstrated that caste and community had not receded into obsolescence with the coming of modernity, rather that casteism and caste discrimination continue even in the present. They argued that it is therefore necessary that new forms of caste and community subjectivity emerge as political subjectivities to battle this discrimination. The Mandal report and the debate around the question of reservations was a major stimulus. It galvanized the dalit-bahujans into a struggle to counter the secular elision of caste. Another important provocation was the rise of Hindutva nationalism which posited a unified identity for Hindus and sought to mask the question of caste and discrimination by projecting the Muslim Other as the real enemy to all Hindus. Several intellectuals and activists powerfully challenged this view.

The most notable among such challenges remains, Kancha Illaih's book, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*. Hence the confident assertion that dalits are not Hindus.

The impact of these changes is reflected in the growth of a strong dalit-bahujan movement in the nineties in state of Andhra Pradesh. At the state level, the massacres of dalits in Chunduru and Karamchedu exposed the deep-rooted prejudices against the dalits and the brutal violence and humiliation that they are subjected to. These incidents gave birth to a radical political consciousness among the dalit-bahujans of the state. A literary and political struggle took shape and a vigorous and energetic critique of the existing Brahmanical culture was elaborated (Ilaiah (1996) 2005), (K. Srinivasulu 1994), (Srinivasulu and Sarangi 1999).

I think that all these developments have led to a fundamental change in the nature of Indian democracy and the nature of the people's representatives. Commenting on Indian democracy during the Nehruvian decades, Sudipta Kaviraj observed that, "Representative democracy is a surprisingly non-innocuous phrase. It can change its meaning astonishingly with a shift in emphasis. I do not wish to stress the fact that we had a representative *democracy*; but that our democracy was deeply *representative* (Kaviraj 1998, 155)." This situation has, however, changed after the 1970s according to him. The majority of the Indian people have slowly emerged out of that cultural structure of representativity. "The poor and disprivileged have rejected the restraints and alienation imposed by that representativity ....Increasingly, the docility fostered by the caste system is being replaced by a tendency on the part of the poor and oppressed to assert themselves, giving rise to a culture of insubordination (Kaviraj 1998, 168-169)." In this changed scenario, can the profile of the citizen-devotee remain unchanged?

Even as the state and the media invest the image of the citizen-devotee with an empirical facticity, it is possible to find evidence that suggests that the citizen-devotee is neither a static nor a passive figure. This is the background against which we ought to view the three counter-examples that I explore below. This is not an effort to merely find voices/practices of resistance to the dominant construction of a particular kind of religious subjectivity. It is an effort to track the political changes that have made imperative a change in the relationship between the people's representative and the citizen-devotee.

The people's representative is no longer just the reformer/pedagogue/leader who will awaken and lead the masses. With the undermining of the certainties of secular modernity, he or she is perhaps merely a representative—not an agent in his/her own right but an agent in the sense of a person who acts on behalf of the people. Is it surprising then that Gaddar, the revolutionary poet-singer long aligned with the Naxalite movement led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninst) in the state found it necessary to mark his presence at the 2005 Bonalu celebrations in the new MLA quarters of Hyderabad city?

A Lower Caste Religious Festival Becomes Visible and Legitimate

Bonalu is a festival of the non-brahmanical or lower castes in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. The festival is the worship of the local village goddesses who are known by several different names like Yellamma, Maisamma, and Pochamma. Over the last decade the festival has acquired a new kind of visibility that it had not enjoyed in

previous years. I recount the story of this new visibility in order to argue that the profile of the citizen-devotee is changing over the years and this change can be tracked along two axes. One axis would be that of the government of the citizen-devotee by the state, by religious organizations, by voluntary reformist organizations and a host of other networks/actors who are engaged in the government of others. A second and important axis would be the axis of counter-practices by those who are governed.

On the one hand, the story of the Bonalu festival when viewed from the history of the famous Ujjaini Mahankali temple fits well into a narrative of gradual assimilation of the goddess cult into mainstream Hinduism through processes of reform and the take-over of the temple governance by the nation-state. Objectionable lower caste practices like animal and bird sacrifices were disallowed within temple precincts, the temple and practices of worship were gradually brahmanized in accordance with a *dakshinachara* (right-handed) tradition of *sakti* worship, and the conduct of the temple's finances, the conduct of its periodical festivals and the conduct of the temple's visitors and devotees were all now determined by the state and its approved agents.

The Secunderabad Mahankali temple, an important centre for the Bonalu festival is believed to have been setup in 1815 by a *doli* bearer in the British army by the name, Suriti Appaiah. Roughly a century and a half later, the temple was taken over by the Indian state's Endowments department in 1953. In an interview that I conducted with the head priest of the temple, he spoke of the gradual brahminization of the temple once it was taken over by the Endowments department. He said that before the take-over by the government there was no regular worship as prescribed by the *shastras*. "Prior to that there was worship of the goddess as a *grama devata,* a village goddess but not according

to the *shastras*. There was sincere bhakti no doubt, but *they* (referring to the lower castes) had no knowledge. But ever since the government took over, the *sri chakram*[8] was installed and there is daily worship based on shastric traditions". When I asked him about animal sacrifices, he said, "Look there are two forms of sakti (goddess) worship, one is the *dakshinachara* tradition and the other is the *vamachara* tradition. The *vamachara* tradition believes that the goddess is pleased with worship using the meat, fish, alcohol and sex. The worship rituals of the lower castes are based on this belief. Therefore, there is drinking, dancing and sacrifice of goats and hens. But all this is done only outside the temple. *They* don't come inside. On the day of Bonalu, we don't conduct any pujas, *they* do it all."

The priest recalled that in the old days when the Arya Samaj was very influential in these parts—the Deccan Manava Seva Samithi was formed. It was a reformist organization that was meant to dissuade the lower castes from following such low forms of worship and ritual as animal and bird sacrifice, drinking during festival time etc. Therefore, he told me that during the Bonalu *jatara*, as devotees got ready for the animal sacrifice, members of the Deccan Manava Seva Samithi would sit in front of that area and begin their fast in protest.

Kancha Ilaiah's provocative and highly illuminating account of Dalit-Bahujan life in India describes the various goddesses who are worshipped by the dalit-bahujans and the ways in which they differ from the Brahmanical deities that are revered by the upper-caste Hindus. He not only gives an account of their distinctiveness but also critiques the

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[8] The sri chakram is a yantra—a diagrammatic representation of the great goddess. This is used mostly in goddess worship and in Tantric practice. See Spivak's essay Moving Devi (esp. pp. 144-146) for a pictorial representation of the *srichakra* and further explication about its significance.

mainstream Hindu culture that has always treated them as inferior and not worthy of being worshipped. Indeed, the upper-castes in South India regarded both these deities and the practices of worship especially animal sacrifice associated with them as barbaric and primitive. In their view both the lower caste deities and devotees were clearly in need of reform. Given this dominant Brahmanical perception of dalit-bahujan gods and goddesses, it is not surprising that Bonalu, a festival that was celebrated in the Telangana region by the "lower" castes had remained invisible to a media and public sphere dominated by upper-caste Andhra people. The ambivalence of the reformist state to practices that seemed to stem from ignorance and superstition like animal and bird sacrifice made this highly popular religious and cultural event largely invisible outside Telangana.

In an article written a few years ago, M.S.S. Pandian discusses the interesting debate that arose following a ban on animal and bird sacrifices in Tamilnadu temples in 2003 by the then Chief Minister, Jayalalitha (Pandian 2005). The ban was revoked the following year in 2004 right before Parliamentary elections claiming that this was done "in deference to their [rural people's] religious beliefs in order to remove their fear of retribution for not following the centuries old custom". While the government's somewhat reluctant (or some may say opportunistic) deference to popular belief is in itself interesting, even more so are the different arguments made and the different positions taken following the announcement of the ban. Pandian recounts the seemingly odd scenario where members of the Hindu Right were defending the ban and members of the Left in Tamilnadu were defending animal sacrifices as an age-old custom of the people. He then proceeds to demonstrate the ways in which supposedly religious and secular reasoning overlap and

often inadvertently work in the cause of the same agendas. What is of particular interest to me is the way in which the Hindutva appropriation of the ground of true Hinduism had forced the Left in India to change its stand with regard to popular practices. As one reader of the newspaper, *The Hindu* commented, "The Left's opposition to the ban is intriguing. I recall how a veteran communist leader used to be at the spot with his comrades before the traditional ritual began in our temples and stridently register his objection. (Pandian 2005, 2313)"

As I had pointed out earlier, the attempts to reform and re-shape the religious subjectivities of the people was a project undertaken not only by the Left but also organizations like the Arya Samaj. The moral pressure that the Arya Samaj allied organization, Deccan Manava Seva Samithi sought to exert on the Bonalu devotees shared much with the pedagogic approach of the Left. The masses had to be educated, enlightened and reformed. Despite such efforts, Bonalu's popularity with the Telangana masses continued only to gain a renewed significance in the nineties in the context of the rise of Dalit-bahujan assertion and the growth of the movement for a separate Telangana. Around 1996-97, when the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), a political party devoted to the cause of securing separate statehood to Telangana was formed under the leadership of K.Chandrasekhar Rao, various Telanagana festivals like Bonalu, Batukkamma, Samakka-Saarakka Jatara and Peerla Panduga[9] were all recast as symbols of Telangana culture and as proof of a distinct Telangana tradition and history. In one sense, it could be argued that

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[9] All these are local Telangana festivals. Batukamma festival is celebrated all over Telangana at the same time as the better-known pan-Indian festival of Dasara. Samakka-Sarakka jatara at Medaram village in Warangal district of Telangana is an annual festival that commemorates and celebrates the courage and bravery of two tribal women—mother and daughter, Samakka and Sarakka in their fight against the imperial army of the Kakatiya dynasty in the medieval period. Peerla Panduga is the local name for Mohurram (a Muslim Shia festival) in which not only Muslims but all non-Brahmanical caste groups of Telangana villages participate.

there was an explicit politicization of Bonalu and other festivals in the cause of a separate Telangana. But I wonder if there ever was a time when Bonalu existed in a space that was not politicized? Was it ever a purely religious or cultural event? Is any event in India a purely religious event? The politicization argument presumes separate realms of religion and politics that are then contaminated by each other. However, if we examine closely the discourse that decrees the distinctions between religion and superstition, between religion and philosophy and spirituality, then we will be able to discern the play of power and the rationality that lie behind such determinations.

Through the 2000s, Bonalu time has been an occasion and platform for raising the separate Telangana issue. One significant part of the Bonalu festival is the event of the *Rangam*. Rangam is the time when a young woman possessed by the spirit of the goddess makes predictions for the following year. Usually the predictions are rather general in nature, they usually predict good or poor rains, and comment on the health and general prosperity of the people of the state. However, in the Rangam predictions of 2004, the young woman making the yearly prediction took everyone by surprise when she made a political prophesy that Telangana would be formed soon.[10] In 2006 leaders of all political parties were present at the Bonalu celebrations and so was Gaddar, the revolutionary balladeer who had been taking an active part in the movement for separate Telangana[11]. The presence of a Maoist in the festival celebrations caused quite a stir but his response was that Bonalu was a people's festival and also a symbol of Telangana culture and

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[10] Andhra Jyothi 2004

[11] "Congress, BJP, TRS leaders unite for Bonalu" The Hindu 31/07/2006
http://www.thehindu.com/2006/07/31/stories/2006073114450300.htm

therefore he wanted to be a part of it.[12] As recently as the 2009 Bonalu, which was being

celebrated after the general elections to the Indian Parliament and to Legislative

Assmebly of the state of Andhra Pradesh, the Rangam predictions didn't mention politics

except in the general sense. Instead, the goddess complained that no sacrifice of meat was

made to her despite her repeated requests. Devotees and officials present on the occasion

tried to pacify her by reminding her of the official ban on animal sacrifice.

As I have outlined in the previous section on the media, the late nineties and the 2000s

saw the tremendous growth of private television channels. The TV channels gave

prominent coverage to the Bonalu celebrations and gave it a visibility that was hitherto

unknown. Through the decades of late nineties and the two thousands, almost all Telugu

newspapers carried special city and district supplements that covered the celebrations

extensively with several accompanying photographs of devotees as well as political

patrons of the devotees.

Adopting Foucault's method of eventalization, we could place the new visibility of

Bonalu at the centre of a polyhedron with many faces[13]. The growth of the separate

Telangana movement, the rise of the BC leaders and the dalit movement have all lead to a

confident claiming of public space and media space by dalit-bahujans. As a dalit media

activist and colleague of mine remarked to me there was an attempt at least in some

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[12] (Srisailam 2009) Interview with Pittala Srisailam

[13] In the interview titled, "Questions of Method", Foucault explains, "A breach of self-evidence, of those self-evidences on which our knowledges, acquiescences and practices rest: this is the first theoretico-political function of 'eventalization'. Secondly, eventalization means rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays or forces, strategies and so on which at the given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary. In this sense one is indeed effecting a sort of multiplication or pluralization of causes…As a way of lightening the weight of causality, eventalization thus works by constructing around the singular event analyzed as process a 'polygon' or rather a 'polyhedron' of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never be properly taken as finite. (Foucault 1991)

sections of the media to project the Bonalu *rangam* in the same way as state radio and TV had projected the Brahmanical astrological predictions usually made on the Telugu New Year day, Ugadi. The tradition of listening to these predictions is called the *Panchanga Sravanam* (literally meaning 'Listening to the Horoscope'). It is mostly an upper caste practice popular in the Andhra regions and for many years both AIR and Doordarshan have been broadcasting and telecasting these as part of the reporting on festival activities. Therefore, some Telangana and dalit activists sought to give *rangam* the same importance that was until then accorded to the *Panchanga Sravanam*[14]. The projection of Bonalu by some sections of the media seemed to have caught on with the competition among the TV channels and the newspapers leading to even greater media exposure. Of course, as Srisailam insisted several times during my interview with him, the media is only interested in ratings and popularity and the commercial gain to be had from them. He argued that the media will cover whatever it thinks will fetch audience attention at that moment. If television viewers now desire to see Bonalu covered then the channels will do so! There should be no trouble in agreeing that the media coverage simply adds Bonalu to the list of festivals/events that are covered and that doesn't mean that the media is fighting an ideological battle on behalf of lower castes or Telangana people. In other words, we could argue that Bonalu is simply more fodder for the media mill that now needs to run all 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. This could very well be the case. Nevertheless, the visibility and positivity conferred by the media is never simply one thing or another. One can never judge in advance or predict the effects of this visibility or the ways in which it can be mobilized in the service of different discourses. In addition, one cannot ignore or cynically dismiss the positive outcome of activism and alternative

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[14] Personal conversation with Srinivas Panthukala

struggles. This is not to say that the resistance to the dominant media can be successful if only political activists were determined and persistent. Not at all, rather it is to say that media effects can be unpredictable and that we should guard against any foregone conclusions when we approach their study.

The Bonalu story serves as an example of how the dominant discourse of a brahminical citizen-devotee can be interrupted to rework that figure. It illustrates a process of de-sanskritization and assertion of a Telangana and dalit-bahujan identity within the broad paradigm of Hinduism. It also discloses the ways in which questions of religiosity are tied to the politics of region and caste.

Why I Am Not a Hindu: The 'Dalita Govindam' Story

The example that I will be discussing in this section is of a different kind. If Bonalu is the story of the complex assimilation into and undermining of brahmanical Hinduism, the story of Dalita Govindam underscores the unresolved question of the relationship between the dalits and Hinduism. The Dalita Govindam controversy that unfolded in Andhra Pradesh over the last two years symbolizes the refusal of the dalits to be co-opted into the Hindu fold. It strikes a dissenting note in the general chorus about the popularity of the Tirupati god and Hindu culture among the people of Andhra Pradesh. It challenges any notion of a homogenous community of Hindu bhaktas.

On April 9, 2007, the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) took up a unique program which they titled, Dalita Govindam. From the Tiruchanur temple idols of Sri Venkateswara and his consort, Padmavati were taken in ceremonial procession to the

dalitawada of a nearby village, Vemuru. There the idols were made available for *darsan* by the dalits of that colony and pujas were conducted. The priests blessed the community with *Veda Asirvadam* (blessings) and later a *saha-pankti bhojanam*, a community meal was organized for all irrespective of caste and creed. The food served was the food brought from the temple. Following the meal, the idols and the accompanying priests slept over in the *dalitwada* and left the following morning.

Supposed to be the brain-child of its chairman, B. Karunakar Reddy, the Dalita Govindam programme and two other programmes called the Matsya Govindam (intended for the fishing community) and the Girijana Govindam (targeting the tribal community) were aimed at proving that the Hindu religion did not believe in caste hierarchies and that the true and original Hinduism treated people belonging to all castes including the dalits and tribals equally. Karunakar Reddy recalled how in his youth he had been involved in a struggle by dalits of Vemuru village to gain temple entry. Therefore, he felt that it was most appropriate to start the dalita govindama programme from that village. He added that these programmes had another purpose too. They were also intended to discourage people from lower castes and from tribes from converting to religions other than Hinduism. Some sections of the print and audio-visual media were all praise for these programmes and described them variously as "a social revolution" and a "mission for equality".

But it was not so easy to mask the scandal that inhabits the heart of Hinduism i.e its contradictory and troubled relationship with the dalits who are both claimed to be Hindus and yet not treated equally as members of the same community. As Karunakar Reddy and others involved in the initiative were to realize, while their acknowledgement of this

scandal had its merits, its nature of the scandal and its enormity were such that once acknowledged they could not be merely addressed by token initiatives like Dalita Govindam. It required far more thoughtful handling and far deeper restructuring of TTD's institutional culture and indeed, of Hindu culture in general, all of which the TTD was neither capable of nor willing to undertake. Thus the programme which they hailed as progressive and unprecedented backfired and soon became the centre of a huge controversy. What this controversy once again underscored was the troubled relationship between the dalits and the Hindu religion. Many Dalit activists and political leaders dismissed the program as being at best a mere token effort, and at worst a patronizing and even proselytizing effort. Several questions were raised both about the details of the event at Vemuru and about the larger initiatives by TTD. As one dalit activist wrote in a newspaper article, the food that was served in the "all-community (read caste) meal" was brought in by the priests from the temple[15]. In other words, they shared, or should we say distributed, the food that they had brought along.[16] The priests shared 'their' food with the dalits but carefully avoided both ritually offering food cooked by dalits to the deities or themselves partaking of it during their stay in the dalit colony. The article further alleged that even the symbolic gesture of the idols and the priests spending the night in the *dalitawada* (dalit colony) was a mere sham as the priests slept on new straw mats that they had brought along with them. The implications were quite clear—no ritual pollution arising out of contact with dalit food or bedding had occurred. The brahmanical structure

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[15] Duddu Prabhakar. "Dalita Govindam Peru lone Vivaksha" Andhra Jyothi daily. April 29th, 2007. P.4. http://www.andhrajyothy.com/editshow.asp?qry=/2007/apr/29edit4. Prabhakar is the State President of Kula Nirmulana Porata Samithi, a dalit organization dedicated to fighting for the annihilation of caste.

[16] As is well known, *annadanam* is a popular practice by temples and at temples; the word could be translated as the gift of food or perhaps more appropriately as a giving away of food, an act of charity usually undertaken by the more privileged to those less privileged. So the all-caste feast was in essence something like an *annadanam*.

of hierarchy and power remained untouched; but claims of valiantly battling it and vanquishing were being made by the TTD. Prabhakar also vehemently attacked the double standards used by the Hindu majoritarians that criticized the activities of Christian missionaries but were quite supportive of TTD initiatives to build temples in *dalitwadas*, to donate huge amounts of money for building concept schools for dalits, for improving their health etc. Could these activities be described as a bribe to deter the dalits from converting to Christianity and other religions? Prabhakar queried.

Several others too later joined him in criticizing the program. Some of the key questions that were raised as part of these criticisms were: what were the reasons for not employing dalits as priests in the Tirumala temple? Why were dalits not allowed to work in the TTD kitchens that prepared the popular *prasadam* of laddus? Why does the TTD not regularize the service of several dalits who were employed with it as scavengers? Why does the TTD not admit dalit students into its *Veda pathshalas* (Vedic schools)? They argued that dalits need education and employment and respect in society rather than token gestures like Dalita Govindam. Clearly by scratching the surface, Karunakar Reddy and his team had only succeeded in exposing the depth of the scandal.

Undaunted by these criticisms, the TTD continued with this program and organized one more *dalita govindam* program in early May 2007. This time the program was conducted at Tallapaka village, the birthplace of Annamayya, the poet-saint of 11th century who composed several kirtanas in praise of the Tirupati God. In Tallapaka however, the program ran into more trouble. Members of the KVPS *(Kulavivaksha Vyatireka Porata Samithi)*, a anti-caste discrimination organization affiliated to the CPI (M) and two dalit organizations namely the Ambedkar Yuvajana Sangham and Mala Mahanadu wanted to

lead the Tallapaka dalits into the local Hindu temple of Sri Chennakesava Swamy.

However, there seems to have been some resistance to this effort and the police

conducted a *lathi* charge on these Left and dalit activists. The *lathi*-charge by the police

came in for wide spread criticism and local political groups criticized the entire exercise

as exacerbating caste discrimination rather than alleviating it.

Still undeterred the TTD organized the Matsya Govindam program some months later in

February 2008. This program targeted fisher folk along the coastal belt of Andhra

Pradesh. As a newspaper reported—

> The fishermen will be taught the basic tenets of Vedic religion, evolution of temple system, the 'do's and don'ts' of idol worship, features of Agamas, rituals, conduct of festivals and so on besides increasing rapport with devotees. The idea apparently sprang from the concern over the collapse of temple system and Hindu form of worship in the coastal belt, mostly inhabited by the members of fishermen community. The coastline spread over nine districts has been found to have 213 temples in 187 villages. While 20 were dedicated to Shakti or Veerabrahmam cult, the rest are 'Ramalayams', mostly in a dilapidated condition. *The move gained pace with the fishermen community itself complaining of 'poaching' by other faiths in the coastal belt.* The president of Kakinada-based 'Matsyakara Sankshema Samithi', Koduru Jayaram, had represented to the TTD to save Hindu temple system by training the members of the community in priesthood.[17] *(emphasis mine)*

Here was an attempt not only to tutor the fishermen into proper Hinduism but also an

anxiety to keep them from converting to other religions like Islam or Christianity. The

effort was directed to keeping the Hindu population intact as much as it was directed

towards saving the Hindu temple system. Matsya Govindam was launched at Avanigadda

village of Krishna district. The official press release by the TTD was indicative of the

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[17] "TTD launches Matsya Govindam" The Hindu Date:11/02/2008
URL: http://www.thehindu.com/2008/02/11/stories/2008021153170300.htm

pedagogic (its critics would call it patronizing) mode of the entire exercise. The release expresses surprise (or is it relief?) that the fisher folk sat through the entire ritual wedding and puja ceremonies in devotion and silence. In June 2008, the TTD undertook the Griijana Govindam which was a training program for tribal priests in basic Hindu temple rituals. They were expected to perform these along with their regular rituals in tribal temples.

Even as TTD continued with these efforts, the controversy and opposition to these programs erupted once more. It was discovered that the idols used for the first Dalita Govindam program at Vemuru village now lay abandoned in one of the rest houses for the TTD priests. Dalit organizations which had been opposing the Dalita Govindam programme from the very start saw this as further and clinching evidence of the discrimination against dalits. They argued that the idols which had been to the *dalitwada* were not deemed fit to be worshipped along with the idols. A Joint Action Committee of various dalit organizations was formed and they demanded that the TTD place the idols in the sanctum sanctorum of the Tirumala temple. For its part, the TTD argued that this was not possible since the idols had not undergone the rituals prescribed by the *Agama Sastras*. A People's Front -- comprising of various dalit and bahujan parties like the Republican Party of India, Mahajana Party, BC United Front Party, Secular Democratic People's Party of India, Bahujan Communist Party, Dalit Bahujana Front. B. Bojja Tharakam, president of RPI, and P. Ramakrishnaiah, president, BC United Front party, in a statement justified the demand, charging the TTD with encouraging untouchability.

It seems as if following the sustained campaign by the dalit organizations the TTD was forced to withdraw these outreach programs. In January 2009, the new TTD chairman,

D.K. Adikesavula Naidu was reported to have criticized the Dalita Govindam as an unnecessary hype and a mistake.[18] He declared that the god, Govinda was universal and there was no need to add the name of any caste as a suffix or a prefix. "Everyone is equal before the Lord and the TTD has been following the principle for the last several decades," he said.[19] However unsatisfactory this particular denouement might be, the declaration seemed to have finally pulled the curtain on a row that had lasted for more than a year and a half.

The Dalita Govindam controversy introduces a dissonance in the homogenous narrative that cinema, media and the state construct of the citizen-devotee. It asks the uncomfortable question of caste and refuses the interpellation of dalits as less fortunate members of a majority religion. It also exposes the Hindu majority's fear of dalit conversion to other religions.

I have thus far confined my discussion and examples to the broad realm of cultural politics in Hinduism and related castes. But this is not to suggest that the citizen-devotee formulation works only in relation to Hindus and other castes. Rather as a governmental category it works to fix the identities of populations along discrete religious lines. In fact, as some scholars have pointed out, the recognition of a group as a religious minority can lead to an unwanted prioritization of its supposed religious needs over its other economic or civic demands. So, for example, Praful Bidwai bemoans the fact that government's idea of Muslim welfare is to provide subsidies for Haj pilgrims. Writing in 2007 in the wake of the Sachar Committee Report, he remarks that "This year, the Haj subsidy will

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[18] "TTD chief says Dalita Govindam irrelevant" The Times of India 29 Jan 2009

[19] ibid

rise by about Rs.50 crore to a little under Rs.400 crore. Although this is a tiny amount, and benefits less than one-thousandth of India's Muslims, it probably represents the *largest single head* of expenditure by the Central government on 'Muslim welfare' (Bidwai 2007). This can further lead to a competitive doling out of subsidies especially to religious minorities. Y.S. Rajasekhar Reddy, the Chief Minister of AP announced a subsidy for Christian devotees from India to visit Jerusalem and for the past two years batches of pilgrims are leaving the country aided by government subsidy. It was no surprise to soon find a Hindu petitioning the law asking for Hindus to allotted travel subsidies to visit pilgrimage centers in the country. The identification of the citizen-devotee as one whose religious identity can not only be fixed but also separated from his or her social identity has lead to more important ramifications, namely the denial of reservations for dalits and OBCs among Muslims and Christians. But that is material for another study. For now, I conclude with my third example which addresses the question of caste and religious identity from a different angle.

A Different Mythology and a Different History: An Example from *Muslimvada Sahityam*

That the uses of myth and its invocation in current discussions of identity continue to provoke, challenge, and even confound established notions of religious identity and difference is demonstrated by one of the songs sung during the observance of the mourning rituals associated with Mohurram, or *Pirla Pandaga* as it is called locally. In many parts of Andhra Pradesh, Mohurram is observed not by Shia Muslims alone;

several lower castes in the villages too participate in these rituals and sing songs.[20] In one

such song, the Islamic story of Karbala and the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussain is

incorporated into a local mythology infused with Puranic motifs and elements. Therefore,

Fatima Bi undertakes a twelve-year penance (*tapas*) to obtain children. Lord Siva and

Goddess Parvati pleased with her penance appear to grant her a boon of two children

named Aasanna (Hassan) and Usanna (Hussain). The children grow up to become skilled

warriors. However they are attacked and killed in battle with enemy Turks. But after 41

days, with transformed selves, they reappear in Siva temple and he tells them that they

will be reborn as Sita's twins, Lava and Kusa. They will later go to Mecca and become

Pirs.[21]

There are two ways of reading this "mixed mythology" and the service it is pressed to

perform. If this were used solely as an example of the supposed syncretic culture that

exists between Hindus and Muslims, then it would be in the service of a secular

nationalism that is premised on the assumption of two radically different communities

who then come together in a spirit of amity that extends beyond mere toleration. As

Viswanathan has forcefully argued, syncretism is an essential fiction of the modern

nation state and can often be used to gloss over the historical reality of religious

difference and questions of power (Viswanathan 1996). She says that it can only offer

nostalgia as a resource for confronting the intractable political problem that religious

difference poses. She argues—

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[20] Bayly provides an account of the observance of the Mohurram rituals in Tamilnadu especially Madras city. See the chapter, "The Muslim Religious Traditions in South India" in (Bayly 1992)

[21] (Premlatha 2005, 77). Premlatha prefers the term, "Telugollu" i.e Telugu people to the term "Hindus" since the latter term is not used by the castes who participate in the Moharrum rituals in rural Andhra Pradesh.

> The language of sharing, however, obscures the means by which competing groups have negotiated their difference, and it further removes the element of power relations leading to the moments of co-existence. If the meaning of syncretism is made interchangeable with cross-fertilization, whereby Hindus who patronize mosques or Muslims who worship at Hindu temples are deemed to be more syncretic in their practices than those who strictly align themselves to the customs of their own faiths, then the elasticity of identity entailed by this definition dissolves the perspectives from which these multiple identities are constructed in the first place (Viswanathan 1996).

She rightly cautions that when syncretism is not adequately historicized, the formative energy of identity and community is replaced by frozen icons of communal solidarity. So what is being offered to us through such myths that confound more familiar narratives of Hinduness and Muslimness? Is it sheer nostalgia for the prior existence of a unified community? And even so, can this nostalgia be a useful tool for imagining newer kinds of futures? Is it mere antiquarian interest in customs and practices that have no place in the modern liberal state and are therefore disappearing? Or can it be used as a critique of liberalism that claims to produce uniform and abstract citizens who have notionally transcended tradition, ethnicity and religion, while all along, the majoritarian views of the nation and belonging provide the substance of this national citizen?

Even while being mindful of Viswanathan's cautions, I think there is another way of reading this myth and the use it is being put to. We can read Premlata's essay which cites this song as offering an example of the overlapping spaces of embodied interaction between two distinct historically constituted communities—lower caste Hindus and Muslims.[22] We should keep in mind the performative context of the song—the

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[22] I borrow the idea of a historically constituted community of difference from (D. Scott, Toleration and Historical Traditions of Difference 2000) Scott offers a very useful critique of the secular-liberal framework and its inability to move beyond individualism and think of ways that will enable "non-liberal

observance of Mohurram by several caste groups in the village along with the Muslims

and the embodied practices and memories associated with it.[23] Then we are able to see

that this is an account that is invoked and deployed not in the service of the nation-state

and its attempts at defining a national character, but rather for the purposes of a project

that aims, in fact, to undermine those very attempts by introducing the unsettling question

of caste. I would argue that such a project open up the possibilities for an alternative

imaginings of a community that lies at the intersection of caste and religion. In other

words, such a conception can function as a powerful critique of majoritarian conceptions

of a unified and homogenous Hindu community that obscures the persistence and power

of caste hierarchies. Such a conception would emphasize not the horizontal divisions of

discreet religions but of the vertical divisions of caste and cult that cut across and

complicate the horizontal demarcations.

But does this account then call for an erasure of religious difference in the service of

Hindu and Muslim lower caste unity? That does not seem to be the case. There is no

subsuming of one identity to another—no equal or unequal assimilation into a nationalist

identity. The larger framework within which this different "mythology" is placed is

within the emerging body of literature in Telugu called *Muslimvada Sahityam* (which can

be literally translated as Muslimist Literature) (Skybaba 2004), (Skybaba and Yellaiah

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historical communities to embody their historically constituted traditions of difference in politically meaningful ways."

[23] Mohammed Nisar's "Mulki" [Native] (pp. 30-38) is an important story that narrates how Pirla Pandaga (Mohurram) is the site for the articulation of a Muslim and lower caste community in the village. See (Skybaba 2004). Two other important stories that powerfully portray the painful disintegration of affective ties between Muslims and dalits and lower castes with the spread of Hindutva are Mohammed Khadeer Babu's "Jameen" [Land] (pp. 268-274) and Sheikh Puliveedu Gaffar's story, "Khabootara" [Pigeons] (pp. 175-182) also in (Skybaba 2004)

2005), (Shajahana and Skybaba 2006). The explicit cultural-political project of this literature, which emerged in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition, is to counter the vilification of Muslims by the Hindu right and to assert Muslim identity as a positive and enabling resource. The 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat too has been an important stimulus to this literary initiative lending it a sense of greater urgency and critical responsibility. This literature brings density, texture and richness to our understanding of what it means to be a Muslim today in India and more specifically in Andhra Pradesh. Working against dominant images and stereotypes of Muslims, many of the stories present a complex image of Muslim lives. In the same way, while there is profound anger in relation to Hindutva politics and the Gujarat carnage and a strong desire to counter that discourse, there are other deeply felt and powerfully portrayed experiences as well. For example, there is in many stories a passionate desire for education, for economic betterment and for a stable and secure life.

The caste hierarchy and difference within Muslim communities is a major theme, with particular focus on Dudekula[24] Muslims to which many of the writers of this movement belong. This also serves to underscore another important theme of this writing, that is, the indigenous status of these communities and their culture—they call themselves '*desi* Muslims' that is converts from the lower castes, distancing themselves from the '*nawabi* Muslims' or Muslims belonging to the *ashraf* classes of Hyderabad, for instance. Therefore the centrality of the *dargah* to this practice of Islam is also fore grounded in

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[24] Dudekula, Pinjari and Laddaf Muslims are groups of converts to Islam from the untouchable and lower castes. They are ostracized by upper caste Muslims both for their caste origins as well as for retaining many religious and ritual practices that are seen as 'Hindu' and 'un-Islamic'. A majority of them live in utter poverty and a general state of illiteracy and unemployment. See (Saheb 2003)

much of this literature. Thereby they also seek to counter the charge leveled by the Hindu Right against Muslims as being of 'foreign' origins. There is a recognition that this culture is under attack from both reformist Islamic organizations like the *jamaats* who disapprove of and discourage these practices because they are 'un-Islamic,' and from the younger generation of dalits and OBCs who seem to have moved away from it towards more Right wing ideas. Consequently, there is an element of nostalgia and a sense of impending loss in some of the stories that celebrate the existence of this '*desi* Muslim' culture.

However, these expressions of nostalgia need not be seen as merely longing for a past that is surely gone by and hence irretrievable and unattainable. Rather they can also be read as fresh imaginings of possible political and cultural futures. In this process, settled ideas of majority and minority too are destabilized and made ready for re-articulations of a different kind.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I have tried to show that popular religion mediated by the cinema is neither simply a vestige of India's unchanging religious culture, nor is it indicative of the not- yet-modern and insufficiently secularized nature of the Indian public. Through tracking the figure of the citizen-devotee in Telugu cinema and popular media, I have argued that the religious mode of being is crucially mediated both by modern political formations like the nation, the state and the processes of governmentality as well as the mass media which make it visible in particular ways. Conversely, I have also argued that the figure of the citizen itself despite the abstract and ideal status it enjoyed for a long time in political theory is, (as a great deal of recent theoretical work demonstrates) shaped by particular national histories and myths. The citizen is also an embodied and affective being whose identity and sense of belonging to a particular community or communities is shaped powerfully by cinema and other mass media. Hence, the modern devotee is also a citizen-figure and a governable category besides being a religious subject. Therefore, we cannot theorize simply the citizen or the devotee, we can only talk of this modern formation—the citizen-devotee. In that sense, this dissertation has focussed on the public, political contexts and media within which identities take shape through contestation, negotiation and disagreement.

The Many Avatars of the Citizen-Devotee on the Telugu Cinema Screen

In Part I of the dissertation we have seen that in the decades of the 70s and 80s, NTR emerged as an exemplary citizen who having played many mythological roles claimed to

embody Telugu nationalism. He was able to fashion the Telugu-Hindu identity into a populist identity that could galvanize the people into a political body. The Telugu identity enabled him to articulate a politics of the vernacular region that could be used to challenge the hegemony of the national language, Hindi and the national politics dominated by the Congress party. The two other chapters in this part of the dissertation deal with other genres and with later decades namely the 1990s and the 2000s to reveal a very different configuration of religious identity, regional identity and language politics not to mention an altered dynamics of caste and gender. The two Ramadasu films discussed in Chapter 2 mobilize an exemplary citizen-devotee from the past in order to articulate in the 1960s a syncretic and nationalist approach to the question of religious difference. But the more recent 2006 version of the story displays a strident majoritarian Hindu nationalist ideology in which a Telugu-Hindu identity is opposed, not the national-Hindi hegemony, but to a minority Urdu-Muslim configuration.

The minor genre of the goddess films discussed in Chapter 3 discloses a very different religious and language politics. Here the depiction of the lower caste subaltern village goddess is one that is shared both by the Tamil and Telugu subaltern worlds. Hence, many goddess films of the 80s and 90s were made in both languages or were dubbed from one to the other. Moreover, the centrality given to the goddess and her female devotee also represent a very different politics of gender from that of the male-centred genre of the mythological. The generic shift away from melodrama to the introduction of elements of horror too render the goddess film genre extremely interesting. I argued that introducing the issue of caste threatens the Telugu social that the earlier mythological and devotional films had carefully pieced together. Therefore, horror figures in these genres

not only because of the different nature of subaltern goddesses but because of the perceived threat to the old social order.

In the second part of the dissertation I presented an anthropology of the ways in which film viewers are addressed as devotees. I recounted the complex ways in which governmental film policy, film publicity and film criticism form the matrix within which the film spectator is forged as both film spectator and devotee at the same time. While I argued that we need to pay attention to the *habitus* the viewer brings to her reception of the film, I also cautioned that equal attention needs to be paid to the ways in which the disciplines of film-making responded to, and in turn, shaped spectator responses.

Are the Telugu Mythological and Devotional Genres Dead? The Present Moment

Let me now address a question that I have not quite answered directly in the course of this dissertation. Although the answer may be quite evident by now, let me nevertheless attempt to answer it using a recent example. In 2004, the film *Sri Anjaneyam* was released. It was a devotional film made by one of the top film directors at that time Krishna Vamsi better known for his romantic and action thrillers. Pre-release publicity of the film repeatedly emphasized the fact that a team of technicians from Hollywood were working on the computer-generated special effects in the film. The director spoke repeatedly about how the film combined technical excellence with a deep understanding of the philosophy of bhakti expounded by the God Anjaneya, also known as Hanuman. On the day of the release a quarter-page newspaper advertisement announced the arrival of the film into theatres. Interestingly enough, on the same page, placed next to this

advertisement was the advertisement for another film—the Hollywood film, Spiderman 2! This juxtaposition of advertisements brought home to me in a flash what the Telugu genre was up against in the new century. I will elaborate what I mean in a moment.

As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, the mythological genre declined gradually in Telugu as it did in other language cinemas too. However this was less because of declining belief or increasing secularization, rather the reasons had entirely to do with the craft of film making and its economics combined of course, with audience expectations of the genre. In order to remake films from familiar stories the film had to offer spectacle either in the form of a super- star cast or expensive settings and costumes or brilliant visual effects. Also as mentioned in Chapter 3 with the '90s devotional films like *Ammoru* the practice of using computer generated special effects had come into vogue and the audience expected each new film the better the last one in this respect. Hence, the claims made by Krishna Vamsi and his team about hiring a Hollywood technical team! Besides this, when these films were released they were competing against Hollywood big budget movies like Spider Man which were technically quite advanced and were now being dubbed into local Indian languages. Therefore, *Sri Anjaneyam* was competing not only with other Telugu films in the genre but also with Hollywood films too in terms of capturing audience attention with cinematic excellence.

This means that only an expensive and well-made devotional film stood a chance to become a success or else it had to remain content with its earlier B movie status. Meanwhile, of course mythological and devotional serials continue with unabated popularity on television both in Hindi and Telugu languages. Even channels meant for children like Pogo and Cartoon Network are replete with serials featuring Hindu

mythological characters like Hanuman, Ganesha, Krishna and Bheema all now transformed into super kids moving effortlessly between mythical and modern worlds. So, the mythological and devotionals have far from disappeared from our modern world. These genres as the Telugu audience knows from the 1950s to the 1970s may no longer be alive but the mythological and devotional genres in their television and big budget movie avatars are still alive and well!

Presents and Futures of the Citizen-Devotee

Just as the old genres and forms of the mythological and devotional films have changed, so have the film-viewing publics and their practices. The film-viewers that I sought to describe in Chapter 4 and the collective viewing and debating habits that they spoke about are no longer the modes in which cinema of any genre, let alone the devotional is viewed. As new genres of film and new audio-visual technologies radically alter modes of film-making, exhibition, circulation and viewing, we will need newer anthropological accounts of these shifts and changes. Those are critical tasks to be undertaken as future research projects.

In the meantime, let me conclude this study with some reflection on the presents and futures of the citizen-devotee figure that I have been tracking. As I see it now, the citizen-devotee figure is now transforming into three over-lapping formations---as a media public, as a political counter-public and as a consumer collective.

The developments that I described in Chapter 5 of Part III of the dissertation show the ways in which cinema's ability to "record and document" coupled with the growth of

news television channels produce the "reality" of citizen-devotees. Today increasingly the citizen-devotees appear as media publics.

At the same time as the examples described in Chapter 6 demonstrate , citizen-devotee publics carry within them the potential for new political subjectivities and counter-publics that challenge processes of governmentality. The *Bonalu* and *Dalita Govindam* examples as well as the examples drawn from the new minor literature, *Muslimvada Sahityam* demonstrate that new formations of the citizen-devotee collectivities are being created mainly around the axis of caste. In recent times the assertion of the Dalit Christian identity and culture as well as assertion of lower castes among Muslims too are developments that need critical attention. Some of these assertions centre on demands for reservations but there are others that interrogate the terrain of the cultural to challenge the hegemony of high-caste Hinduism and even upper caste Christianity and Islam. Despite these new political identities, there is also parallel development where citizen-devotees are increasingly being addressed as consumer collectives and encouraged to realize their identities through practices of consumption in the new age of neo-liberalism.

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Appendix 1

Figure 1: NTR as the God Krishna in *Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam* (1965)

Figure 2: Star as God: Framed for Worship

Figure 3: Nagarjuna in and as *Sri Ramadasu* (2006)--Nageswara Rao as Kabir displays his Rama *bhakti*

Figure 4: Playing Ramadasu as Ethical and Political Citizen-Devotee

Figure 5: The King tries to persuade the crowd of citizen-devotees in *Nagula Chavithi* (1956)

Figure 6: The Crowd demands the King worship their goddess. *Nagula Chavithi* **(1956)**

Figure 7: The subaltern goddess makes an appearance in *Ammoru* (1995)

Figure 8: Devotee-crowds gather to acknowledge the appearance

Figure 9: Computer generated special effects in *Ammoru* (1995)

Figure 10: The Violent Goddess: Ramya Krishna in *Ammoru*

Figure 11: Goddess Film Poster: Possessed viewer being blessed by goddess

The poster shows a scene outside the cinema hall where a woman is shown being possessed by the goddess while the *Amman* showers her blessings upon the woman while text reads "With the blessings of *Amman"*. The milling crowd in the background might be a reference to the thronging crowd outside the film theatre.

Poster of *Rajakali Amman*, Tamil, **Rama Narayanan**, 2000,

60"X40"(2sheets)

Source: CSCS Archive