

## Persistence of the Feudal: Star and Film Form in Post 1970s Telugu Cinema

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In the past decade or so Telugu cinema has witnessed a number of major changes in the way films are funded, made, distributed and shown. There is also an unprecedented degree of experimentation with form and genre while a new generation of film stars, both male and female have completed the picture in giving cinema a new look. Simultaneously, the more established stars, especially Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna, have repeatedly demonstrated an inability to move out of the shadow of the 1980s big-budget blockbuster locally known as the mass film.<sup>[1]</sup> The mass film's significance for the industry lies in the fact that it is not merely characterized by a limited set of formal features and thematic concerns but, more importantly, production, distribution and exhibition regimes. So what might be seen and even presented by the industry itself as a problem with individual stars, may in fact be a sign of the inability of the Telugu film industry, or at least a major part of it, to *Bollywoodize* itself. Or in other words to become a part of a much larger culture industry, which includes music, television, fashion, etc, and which is also integrated with the flows of finance capital on a global scale.<sup>[2]</sup> Another sign of the same inadequacy is the fact that we are yet to come across mainstream Telugu films which are not overwhelmingly dependant on the box-office to recover costs.<sup>[3]</sup>

There are close connections between the industrial and filmic (on screen) manifestations of the problem at hand. At the filmic level the seeming impossibility of the big Telugu stars in making a transition into genre films of the kind that are made by the score in Hindi is indeed striking. Compare for example the ease with which most major Hindi stars, including Amitabh Bachchan, are sliding easily between roles of hero and villain. And they die ever so often. A telling sign of the new order of things in Hindi cinema is the comprehensive manner in which Bachchan was reduced to a cartoon villain in

*Boom* (Kaizad Gustad, 2003). All this is impossible for not only Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna but also for some of the younger stars like NTR Junior (grandson of the man himself and nephew of Balakrishna), Mahesh Babu (son of 'Superstar Krishna', film star, studio owner and former Congress MP) and Prabhas (nephew of Krishnam Raju, film star and former BJP minister at the centre). This incomplete list of second and third generation stars in the film industry in fact leads me to the central concern of this essay: Telugu cinema's considerable and continuing investment in the 'feudal'.

Since the 1990s Telugu films have made numerous and overt references to the illustrious ancestry and lineage of stars. Star 'dynasties' have been created as if nations, and not careers, were at stake. These are but a sign of the multiple layers at which the feudal persists in the Telugu film industry.



The Nandamuri Dynasty: Advertisement. nandamuri Balakrishna and NTR Junior Fans, Bellary, put out in the wake of the success of a recent NTR Jr. film but highlighting the box-office achievement of three generations of Nandamuris. The photograph of NTR Jr. (dancing) is accompanied by those of his father (Harikrishna, right), grandfather (NTR, centre) and uncle (Balakrishna, left). The six smaller photographs are of the office bearers of the association which put out the advertisement. Source: /Superhit/, 24th October, 2003.

NTR Junior's films repeatedly demonstrate the extent to which distinguished lineage has become a source of stardom in the present times. He emerged as a major star when he was barely 20 years old and his growing popularity has resulted in the suffix of Senior being used to refer to the original owner of the name. He has featured in some of the most expensive productions in the recent years and is now finding it impossible to move out of what film critics call the *imaji chatram* (literally, the image's umbrella but obviously referring to the shadow or bind of the screen image the star has been associated with). The image's shadow clearly affects other stars too.<sup>[4]</sup>

This paper will draw attention to some important moments in the recent history of Telugu cinema to show the multiple manifestations of the feudal in Telugu cinema and draw attention to their (film) industrial foundations. The persistence of the feudal is a pointer to the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of the kind of stardom that N.T. Rama Rao (who will be NTR without a suffix in the rest of the essay) put in place in the years immediately preceding the formation of the Telugu Desam Party in 1982 and his election as Chief Minister in 1983. In fact, the production of the kind of stardom coincided with and was indeed made possible by a high degree of investment in constructing a feudal authority on screen, as we shall see below. It would be trivial to suggest that second and third generation stars and images of feudal lords on screen add up to an argument about the feudal nature of Telugu cinema. They are, however, signs of a blockage which is best understood by teasing out both its cultural as well as economic causes. It is also useful to note that the blockage is not caused by an absence (like the signs of capitalist development of the film industry-let us say genre films, which Prasad 1998 would place on the top of his list) but the excessive presence of something whose most obvious manifestation is the male star, the centre of the film industry and film narrative. NTR's career is an important point of entry into the various forces that together created a film industry that is the second largest in the country and also one which actually bettered its Tamil counterpart's attempts at generating a political leadership.

I say bettered because NTR, unlike MGR who was clearly his model, had no prior history of participation in politics. His journey from films to electoral politics was a remarkably short one.

Before going on to discuss NTR let me give some examples of the ways in which recent Telugu films have in fact acknowledged, if not overcome, the fact of blockage. Throughout the 1990s we notice that a recognizable example of a genre film, especially comedy or romance, is suddenly interrupted and intruded upon by developments which force its transformation into a revenge drama or another familiar variant of the melodramatic form that dominated cinema since the 1970s (if not earlier). A couple of clarifications are in order when I present the case thus. Firstly, the domestication of genre films of the Hollywood or Hong Kong variety into familiar filmic forms is a banal occurrence in most Indian film industries. For example, in NTR's *Superman* (V. Madhusudhan Rao, 1980), the hero gets his magical powers from Hanuman and apart from his costume is indistinguishable from other characters the star played in this period. The contrast case is the Hindi cinema's gradual transition into genre films, even if these films display interesting degrees of difference from their equivalents in non-Indian industries.<sup>[5]</sup> Secondly, the interruption or blockage that I have in mind has nothing to do with Lalitha Gopalan's notion of the 'cinema of interruptions' (2003). According to Gopalan, 'the direct address, [and] other features of India popular cinema similarly undercut the hermetic universe developed in Hollywood films by interrupting it with song and dance sequences, comedy tracks and multiple narratives' (18). In this essay, I am not interested in the discussion of whether songs and parallel tracks interrupt the narrative or its constitutive elements.

Returning to the blockage in Telugu films, it is not always possible to feign innocence that the unfolding narrative belongs to anything but the all too familiar local genre (mass film) because of the framing of the narrative by what Prasad (1998) calls the *fragment B*. In his discussion of *Roja* (Mani Rathnam, 1992) and *Damini* (Rajkumar Santoshi, 1993), Prasad draws

attention to the segmentation of their narratives. Labelling the narrative segments as A, B and fragment B, he points out that these films begin with a fragment that properly belongs to B. He goes to add:

Let us note, first of all, that the transition from *fB* to A comes as a rupture, a sharp discursive break which leaves something unexplained until Segment B retroactively absorbs the enigmatic fragment into its order of narration and thereby infuses it with meaning... Thus the fragment serves, in the overall organization of narrative flow, as (1) an enigma which hovers over the action of segment A, a premonition of things to come, of which the figures of the narrative are themselves blissfully ignorant; and (2) a cue which enables us to identify the second break (1998: 222).



Venkatesh, son of D. Ramanaidu, as the saviour of Dalits in *Jayam Manadera*.

Unlike the pre-credit or opening sequence of the 1960s and 1970s star vehicle, the fragment B of the 1990s Telugu films (as well as the films Prasad discusses) does not necessarily deal with an event that occurred in the distant past (birth of the hero, separation from his twin and/or parents). On the other hand, it belongs to another time, a feudal past to be more accurate, which almost certainly intrude into the main narrative even as it

begins as if it were an attempt at a new genre. A highly complex and sophisticated play with the feudal past is to be found in *Jayam Manadera* (Victory is Ours, N. Shankar, 2000).<sup>[6]</sup> The film begins with a failed assassination bid by an underground group to avenge their leader's death. This 'fragment B' sequence is followed by more than an hour of action set in the USA, where the film becomes a neat blend of comedy and romance. The action then moves back into India with the lead pair when the romantic comedy is interrupted by the reappearance of characters from the fragment B sequence and soon enough an attempt is made on the hero's life. He is saved by the assassins who featured in fragment B, and is later introduced to his feudal past (which unfolds in the form of a flashback). It turns out that our NRI hero is in fact the son of an aristocratic radical who was killed by his relatives due to their resentment of his support to the Dalit community. It was the members of this community who constituted the underground hit squad of the opening sequence. The hero, thus appraised of his past, takes on the leadership of the Dalits to complete the unfinished business of avenging his father's death.<sup>[7]</sup>

However, there are enough examples of a truly sudden rupture caused by the re-emergence of a forgotten or suppressed past, often an unmistakably feudal past. In the 1990s a suitably 'backward' region like Rayalaseema was presented as the place which housed the feudal. Out of sight of modern spaces like Hyderabad, the feudal is seen as flourishing in the hinterland. Its sudden visibility in city spaces or to modern citizen figures is always disruptive and dangerous. In *Antahpuram* (Krishna Vamsy, 1999), for example, there is no fragment B. The lead pair is happily settled abroad (Mauritius) with their child when the heroine's husband receives a call from 'home', his village in Rayalaseema. The nuclear family travels to the village, a space which the heroine's husband had earlier left because he wanted to have nothing to do with the feuds which his family had been involved in. Soon he is killed in yet another episode of 'faction'<sup>[8]</sup> violence, and it is with great difficulty that the heroine escapes with her son. The village, and its

feudal ways, cannot be changed and the acknowledgement of the impossibility of changing this place comes in the form of the second movement out of the village (and the Rayalaseema region) of the citizen figure.

Returning to the larger picture, quite frequently the twist in the story occurs just before the interval and thrusts the film away from a move in the direction of a new kind of genre and towards a more 'familiar' one.<sup>[9]</sup>

Arguably, the shift between genres is not so sudden and we are not actually seeing a shift at all but a mere borrowing of elements from elsewhere to retain the basic structure. Even so, persistence of the past is what is at issue here. Not merely because it is the past, and that too an unmistakably feudal and pre-modern past that comes to haunt the protagonist who has moved into a new place and a new time. This story level return of the feudal past, I will suggest, is a prominent sign that there is a refusal to move beyond an older form (the mass film). When the past erupts into the narrative, it is a definite sign that the film will rapidly re-establish the connection with the conventions of the mass film.

It is pertinent to point out that the mass film has been in crisis since the mid-1990s and there was a concerted attempt around the same time by all major stars to break out of their respective *chattrams*. The 'blockage films,' if I may coin a term, mentioned above were a direct consequence of this attempt. The clearest indication of the industry's refusal to abandon the mass film, in spite of the repeated commercial failure of mass films, is the 'Rayalaseema faction film.'<sup>[10]</sup> This variant of the mass film revived the genre and also launched NTR Jr. into stardom even as it absorbed elements from the blockage films. I will mention in passing the very first faction film that featured Balakrishna, the least versatile of stars endowed with the most distinguished lineage.

The faction film builds on the increasing attempts in films as well as the mainstream press to represent the Rayalaseema region as the new home of the feudal order (the older and more familiar one being Telangana, to which I

will return shortly). Coming in the wake of the increasing prominence of Rayalaseema based politicians in state politics (including the present Chief Minister, Dr. Rajasekhar Reddy) and the spill-over violent political rivalries from the region into the state's capital city, the faction film integrated the star-protagonist into a feudal order that was more or less fully fabricated because most factionists are in fact 'upstarts' and have very dubious claims to the pre-colonial or colonial elite of the region.<sup>[11]</sup> The obsession with a feudal past as well as the practice of inventing feudal figures of authority is a direct inheritance from the NTR vehicles of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which I discuss below. For the time being I will only make a passing reference to this aspect of the faction film. In Telugu films from the late 1990s faction feuds became battles between good and evil elements of the region's ruling families. In *Samarasimhareddy*, the faction film which gave the mass film a new lease of life, the blockage is not merely a sign of a past that has also refused to die or an order in need of reform but much more. Here positive feudal values (sense of honour, etc) that supposedly characterize the region are manifested in the hero thus qualifying him for a leadership role, which in any case is always the ultimate end of the mass film hero. The past that bursts into the narrative is not simply the factional violence of the region but also our hero's phenomenal popularity in Rayalaseema and the undying loyalty he commands there. There is also a fascinating twist to the return of the past: the hero impersonates his dead servant, quite literally owning up his past, in order to help the destitute family members.

This film, I would like to argue, marks the second moment of regression as far as the Telugu film industry is concerned. *Samarasimhareddy* was followed by a number of similar films including *Indra* (B. Gopal, 2002) featuring Chiranjeevi, and *Adi* (V.V. Vinayak, 2002, which made NTR Jr. a major star). Not all faction films have been successful and the mass film is once again in crisis. Nevertheless, the faction film demonstrated the lasting value of the

system that NTR put in place in the 1970s. That prior moment to which the faction film returned is what I will call the first moment of regression.

In the 1970s the Telugu film industry made a substantial and hitherto unprecedented degree of investment in the feudal. The most noticeable aspect of this new development was the gradual rehabilitation of the feudal patriarch as the ultimate source of authority on screen. There is a view widely shared by film critics that Telugu cinema went into a moral and political decline from the mid sixties.<sup>[12]</sup> The developments are a little more complex than a narrative of decline would make them out to be. It is certainly difficult to ignore the fact that the Telugu film industry was virtually kick-started by films critiquing feudalism. Notable in this regard are the Gandhian reformist films *Malapilla* (Untouchable Girl, Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, 1938), which offered interesting solutions to untouchability. This film is among the most significant early socials ever made in Telugu. Of more immediate interest to us is *Rytu Bidda* (Son of the Farmer/Soil, Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, 1939), which dealt with problems faced by zamindari ryots. But the critique of feudalism is ambivalent, in Ramabrahmam's film and those that followed. In *Rytu Bidda* it is not the zamindar so much as his wicked servant and relatives who are held responsible for the oppression of peasants.

As for moral decline, the late 1970s witnessed the production of a large number of 'good films', which met the moral and aesthetic standards of the middle class. The new category that thus emerged is locally known as the class film. A prime of example of the class film, possibly the very first, is *Sankarabharanam* (Jewel of Lord Shiva, K. Vishwanath, 1979).<sup>[13]</sup>

Nevertheless, something significant was indeed happening in the films of the late 1970s. Earlier films usually presented parental figures as well as the landed elite and those with old wealth etc, as relics of another era who were willingly or otherwise making way for a new generation or class.<sup>[14]</sup> However, in NTR's films of this period the feudal patriarch was made over as a figure of

lasting contemporary significance and embodying positive authority, which was deployed to battle a range of enemies of state and society. There is a definitive shift in NTR's own roles the late 1970s from a youthful authority figure whose lineage is immaterial or of marginal significance to his ability to represent the masses to another who is quite literally shown inheriting authority from an earlier generation. An example of the earlier kind of star-protagonist is to be found in *Adavi Ramudu* (Lord of the Forest, K. Raghavendra Rao, 1977) in which Ramu (NTR), a non-tribal, performs a number of tasks that Prasad attributes to Bachchan characters engaged in mobilizing the masses. In Bachchan films, of the 're-formed social', '[t]he star became a mobilizer, demonstrating superhuman qualities and assuming a power that transformed the others who occupied the same terrain into *spectators*' (Prasad 1998: 134 original emphasis). Further, the narrative institutionalizes the subaltern as a 'mobilized subject' (Prasad 1998: 142). It is possible to suggest that in *Adavi Ramudu* it is not the character's ancestry so much as the state (he is later appointed as forest officer) that buttresses his authority to represent the tribals.

*Adavi Ramudu* is also an excellent illustration of Madhava Prasad's argument about cine-politics. It is indeed a film that allows us to make a connection between the related arguments he makes about Hindi and south Indian stars. According to Prasad:

Cine-politics is not about the infusion of star charisma into electoral politics, nor about the use of cinema to disseminate party slogans. It is a distinct form of political engagement that emerged in some of the linguistically defined states of southern India at a certain historical juncture where Indian nationalism's ideological suturing could not take care of certain gaps in the symbolic chain. A set of contingent factors led to a situation where cinema, a form of entertainment that was then [1950s] learning to speak, came to be chosen as the site of a strong political investment, where audiences responded with enthusiasm to an offer of leadership emanating from the screen and, through fans associations that emerged later, established a

concrete set of everyday practices that re-affirmed the position of the star as leader (1999: 49).

A key feature of cine-politics, to simplify Prasad's complex argument for the limited purposes of my essay, is 'the unexpected arrival of a figure who seems to be already endowed with the legitimacy to represent us (46).' I have pointed out elsewhere (Srinivas 2006) that in the NTR vehicles such a figure was already in place as early as *Kathanayakudu* (The Protagonist, K. Hemambharadhara Rao, 1969) in the form of a star-protagonist who is offered as being capable of solving problems of corruption, etc, that the film's voice-over narration assures us affect 'every village and city.' That figure of authority, however, is not in any direct fashion dependent on his inheritance. As a matter of fact, *Kathanayakudu* features a middle class militant.

The star-protagonist's incidental linkage with a feudal past, or at any rate the downplaying of the significance of his lineage in his emergence as an authority figure, continues all the way up to the late seventies. In *Kathanayakudu*, for example, the virtual naming of the NTR character as the saviour in the voice-over narration works because *NTR the star* is recognized as someone who is capable of guiding the narrative, not because of his story-level linkages with pre-modern forms of authority. It is therefore possible to suggest that Telugu cinema had in fact done away with the need for aristocratic origins as an explanation for the star-protagonist's authority. The spectator's recognition of the figure on the screen as someone who has a history of providing pleasure, and of course resolving story level problems, was an adequate justification for the manner in which the star was presented as an unquestionable authority figure.

A significant deviation of the NTR vehicle from the Bachchan centred 'aesthetic of mobilization' becomes increasingly evident in the late 1970s and it has to do with the origins of the star-protagonist. Whereas orphanhood marks the Bachchan characters as subaltern figures (Prasad 1998: 143), in late 1970s NTR's films there was a direct connection between the star-

protagonist's ability to represent the masses and his feudal status or lineage. One technique that was frequently deployed was the casting of NTR in a double role as father and son.

In three films which followed in quick succession, *Sardar Paparayudu* (Leader Paparayudu, Dasari Narayana Rao, 1980), *Kondaveeti Simham* (Lion of Kondaveedu, K. Raghavendra Rao, 1981) and *Justice Choudhuri* (K. Raghavendra Rao, 1982) we see older and younger NTRs. They initially occupy separate spaces and are both endowed with the authority to speak for a larger community or collective. In *Sardar Paparayudu* the younger NTR is a police official while the older is a rebel. In all three films, the older NTR represents values that are identifiably those of a bygone era (honour, patriotism, etc) and is clearly burdened by enormous responsibilities while the youth is initially busy fighting petty criminals and taming the heroine. The story revolves around the two NTRs either discovering their relationship (since they have been separated) and/or by the youth growing into his father's shoes. Although one of the NTR characters is a police officer or judge in all three films, the state does not account for his authority so much as it props up or ratifies it. There are also moments of conflict between demands of the state and responsibilities of the protagonist as the embodiment of another kind of authority, as parent, as guardian of a value system, and so on.

Once the link between authority and a bygone order and value system was established in NTR's vehicles, it became possible to actually do away with the father-son routine and present the inheritance of a feudal lineage in terms other than familial. In *Bobbili Puli* (Tiger of Bobbili, Dasari Narayana Rao, 1982), NTR plays Major Chakradhar, a much decorated army officer, whose biological father (Satyanarayana) is an army deserter and spy turned fake swamiji indulging in a variety of criminal activities. He also kills Chakradhar's mother. Chakradhar becomes a rebel after his attempts to bring criminals to justice in the court of law are frustrated by his father and the other villains. He is jailed when he loses his temper in court. While he is in jail his sister is

raped (she dies later) and her husband murdered. Chakradhar escapes from prison and is thought to be dead. He then emerges as the rebel known as the Tiger of Bobbili and begins to put to death the very criminal and corrupt elements the courts failed to punish. He finally kills his biological father and is arrested by the police. The court awards him a death sentence.

Bobbili (now in Vizianagaram district) happens to be a place that is closely identified with pre-colonial authority as well as aristocratic patriots in the popular imagination. Its legends have also been subjects of popular films since the 1960s. Chakradhar is therefore presented as an inheritor of the town's heroic legacy in spite of his biological father. In the latter part of the film he therefore becomes an embodiment of the values of a bygone era, which the heroine at one point says are lost in an age threatened by deep-rooted corruption and public complacency of modern times. Let us also not forget that the inheritance question is mediated by the recall of past cinematic representations of the heroic legacy in the film's naming of the rebel Bobbili Puli.

That there was a circulation of the rehabilitated feudal patriarch beyond the NTR vehicles is clear from the film *Bobbili Brahmanna* (K. Raghavendra Rao, 1984), which features the much younger star Krishnam Raju as Brahmanna, a village headman (who is a living relic of the feudal order), and his modern son. The headman presides over a village where the agencies of the modern state (including the police) are not allowed to enter. Remade as *Dharam Adhikari* (K. Raghavendra Rao, 1986), this film was in fact the model for 1990s feudal nostalgia films like *Pedarayudu* (Ravi Raja Pinisetty, 1995), which were made in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada and occasionally remade into Hindi as well. It is useful to note that *Bobbili Brahmanna*, borrows a part of its title from an NTR vehicle. Further, the full-fledged rehabilitation of the anachronistic feudal authority figure as an awe-inspiring and admirable one, is drawn from *Chanda Sasanudu/Dictator* (N.T. Rama Rao, 1983), a film featuring NTR in a double role, where such a figure made his first appearance

in contemporary Telugu cinema. NTR therefore has a rather direct link with the 1990s feudal revival but that was not all.

This 're-feudalization,' to use the Frankfurt School term loosely, emerges in an interesting context: political as well as industrial. Firstly, these were the post-Emergency years, when there was much political churning in Andhra Pradesh. Arguably, NTR's work of this period anticipates the formation of the Telugu Desam Party.<sup>[15]</sup> I have argued elsewhere that NTR vehicles of this period played a major role in representing the star as an embodiment of Telugu-ness (Srinivas 2006). A more detailed analysis of individual films is called for to demonstrate this point. So let me stay with the relatively safe claim that the resurgence of the feudal lord in NTR films of the early 1980s coincided with his decision to cross over into electoral politics. This could not have been a chance occurrence.

The birth of the TDP was not the only politically significant development of this period. The naxalite movement went through a period of rapid expansion in the post-Emergency years and the CPI (ML) People's War, which later evolved into the CPI (Maoist), was formed from one of the many splinter groups of the CPI (ML) in 1980. Significant for our purposes is the fact that a wide-ranging critique of feudalism was available in the public domain due to the re-opening of the question of feudal oppression in the Telangana region by the movement and its supporters as well as civil liberties groups. I will return to the critique and its manifestation on film shortly.

As far as NTR's own career was concerned, the NTR vehicle of this period facilitated his emergence as the fulcrum of the industry precisely at a time when he was facing stiff competition from younger stars, especially Krishna. Interesting in this regard is the rather dramatic claim by the journalist-biographer Venkata Rao that after 1972 the star was 'spending many days without painting his face' (2000: 23). This was indeed a lean period for a star who had two shooting shifts on most working days for close to twenty years. Venkata Rao also goes on to suggest that the increase in the production of

low budget films was partly responsible for this state of affairs. The lean season would end in a few years when NTR would be busier and more popular than ever. Based on box-office collections Venkata Rao suggests that *Aradhana* (B.V. Prasad, 1976) was the turning point. However, *Aradhana* being a romance is precisely the kind of film that NTR would not do from this point onwards. I suggest instead that the new model began to fall in place in 1977 with *Adavi Ramudu* and *Yama Gola* (T. Rama Rao, 1977). This was also the year when the last successful mythological film in Telugu, *Dana Veera Sura Karna* was made by NTR and also cast him in the roles of Karna, Krishna and Duryodhana. The film was in fact NTR's most overtly political film till that point because it is a non-Brahmin reading of the epic Mahabharata, which presents Duryodhana as a severe critic of casteism.

The return of NTR to the centre-stage of the Telugu industry was on the strength of a new model of stardom, which was a part of the industry's capacity building exercise that in turn ensured new investments could be attracted and absorbed into the industry. All this was of course not accomplished by the late seventies when NTR began to churn out hits on an unprecedented scale. Indeed the star would lend a helping hand as Chief Minister some years later to consolidate the regime of stardom he helped put in place. Film industry's engagement with Telugu identity politics, no doubt driven by government policies, had a formative influence on this moment.

In the 1960s, responding to financial incentives as well as pressure from sections of the film industry and the Telugu press, the film industry began to relocate to Hyderabad from Chennai. The hero of this exodus to Hyderabad was Akkineni Nageswara Rao, who is reported to have told his producers that he would only act in films produced in this city. The love for the motherland of course had everything to do with cash subsidies that government of Andhra Pradesh began to give out to films produced in Andhra Pradesh from the early sixties. The combination of Nageswara Rao, Annapurna Pictures Private Limited (a production company, which was partly owned by Nageswara Rao), and Sarathy Studios, Hyderabad's first post-independence

studio that became functional in 1959, demonstrated that film production was indeed possible and profitable in Hyderabad.

Movement of the film industry meant, among other things, acquisition of vast tracts of land for the construction of cinema halls, studios and production and post-production facilities. Relocation in the Telugu country dovetailed nicely into owning a part of the capital city, which the state government made available to industry personalities at subsidised rates.<sup>[16]</sup>

Moves to relocate the industry came at a time when there were attempts to deploy the agricultural surplus generated in coastal Andhra in the rest of the state. According to G. Haragopal:

The capital thrown up by the agrarian surplus in coastal Andhra could not be ploughed back into the agrarian sector partly on account of the inelastic nature of the agricultural sector and partly because of the failure to engender quick and attractive returns. Consequently the capital was in search of new avenues and green pastures. As a part of this process there was penetration of capital into backward regions like Telangana, which remained underdeveloped under prolonged feudal dominance (1985: 69-70).

Haragopal goes on to state that this attempt met with some resistance in the late sixties (in the form of a movement for a separate Telangana state), which actually resulted in its diversion to 'skyscrapers, hotels and cinema theatres' and, further, 'part of this capital went into film production itself' (71).

Subsidy and real estate driven Telugu nationalism of the film industry was therefore a part of a larger movement of capital-into Telangana region, into Hyderabad city and into the film industry. Whether all or most of this capital had its origin in the coastal Andhra agricultural sector is best left to economic historians to decide. It does however seem inappropriate to call investments by NTR and his contemporaries in Hyderabad *agricultural* surplus and that too from coastal Andhra. There have been repeated attempts to link inflows

into the film industry, especially film production, directly with agricultural surplus in Andhra Pradesh. For example, the producer, distributor, exhibitor and studio-owner, D. Ramanaidu spoke of landing in Madras directly from the village, virtually without any breaks in the journey. The film industry too has frequently represented the village and agriculture as the starting point of the journey of men and money to the film industry (and possible point of return for failures).<sup>[17]</sup> This was of course not always the case. Rural surpluses found a number of local avenues of investment and arrived at the film industry through circuitous routes. New research on the region suggests that finance businesses of various kinds, including hire purchase and chit funds, and transport, in addition to trade in commodities and textiles, were well established in the region. Agricultural surplus was therefore being channelled into local businesses, which in turn contributed to state-level, national and, more recently, global capital flows.<sup>[18]</sup>

Let me therefore leave behind the rich farmer with his bagful of cash on the state transport corporation bus to the capital and try to arrive at a somewhat more accurate picture of what was happening in this period. After the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 the Madras based Telugu film industry quite literally discovered a new market in the Telangana region. Legend has it that in all of Hyderabad-Secunderabad, only one cinema hall showed Telugu films on a regular basis in 1956. Narasiah (1981: 145) claims that in the 1970s the market share of the region rose from 20% to 30% while that of coastal Andhra declined from 60% to 50%. This is a significant claim because he was writing about a period when there was an exponential growth in the exhibition sector across the state, not just in the region, which continued well into the 1980s. All this adds up to one thing: the market for Telugu films was growing all over but the most remarkable growth was in Telangana.

By all standards-except moral standards, whose decline critics began to bemoan in the same period-the 1970s and 1980s was the golden age of Telugu film industry. While the growth of the production sector has been

gestured to by Haragopal, the occasional comment on the film industry by social scientists miss out on the developments in Tamil Nadu. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999) allow us to appreciate the extent to which the unfolding phenomenon was truly regional. Following the election of M.G. Ramachandran as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Tamil film production leapt to an all time high in 1978. Telugu film production, which had on a number of occasions since 1968 crossed that of Tamil, grew at an equally impressive rate resulting in both southern industries matching and overtaking production levels of Hindi films (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 31-32). These figures however are somewhat misleading. For they do not draw adequate attention to the fact that anywhere between 25-40% of films *produced* in Telugu in any given year since the early 1970s were dubbed from other languages, usually other south Indian languages. Dubbing on this scale demonstrates that the market for films had vastly expanded in Andhra Pradesh and could not be catered to by films originally shot in the Telugu language alone. This was at least in part due to the fact that cheap films were needed to feed the lowest rungs of the exhibition ladder, which operated with thin profit margins. Where was the money for all these productions coming from?

While some of the new investments went directly into production, with first time producers arriving with surpluses generated outside the film industry, most new investments, whether originating in agricultural surplus or otherwise, went into *exhibition*-the construction of new cinema halls-and *distribution*.

As indicated earlier, there was a remarkable growth of cinema halls since the 1960s. According to the *Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber Journal* (1964: 56) there were 484 cinema halls in the state in 1964.<sup>[19]</sup> In 1981 there were 1904 cinema halls of which 1153 were 'permanent' cinema halls<sup>[20]</sup> (Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber of Commerce 1981: 131). Even if we assume that that the *Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber Journal* listed only permanent cinema halls, we are still dealing with a massive expansion the exhibition sector over

a two decades period. While there is no conclusive evidence, it is possible to suggest on the basis of conversations with film industry representatives over the past decade that this growth was fuelled by agricultural and trade surplus.

Valentina Vitali has the following point to make about the exhibition sector's role in the film industry:

Whereas production and distribution remained highly fragmented sectors, by the 1960s exhibition had grown into a cohesive force that tended, however, to mobilise local regional capital. That the Indian film industry's locomotive was then and remains today the exhibition sector, is crucial for an understanding of the socio-economic fabric that buttresses Indian films both as commodities and as discursive fields of Indian national configuration (2006: 269).

Vitali is no doubt pointing to the inability of the production sector to carry out a Hollywood style integration of the film industry under its domination, which theoretically speaking could well have happened once local film production began to dominate the Indian screens. Let us assume for the time being that Vitali's argument holds true for Hindi cinema and the Bombay film industry.

The developments in Andhra Pradesh around this time seem to suggest that the relationship between the three sectors of the industry as well as their ability to direct the inflows into the industry were not following the Bombay model. Not only is it difficult to make the claim that exhibition determined which direction the industry would take but it is virtually impossible to ignore the critical role played by distribution in channelling investments into the industry.

K. Narasiah argues that the key development in the 1970s was what he calls the decentralization (*vikendrikarana*) of the film industry, especially of the distribution sector (1981: 145). I will modify this somewhat and suggest that Narasiah is in fact talking about fragmentation, which is Vitali's larger point

too, if we set aside the question of the time line of fragmentation and its consequences. The difference, however, between the two industries seems to be that paradoxically - and this is Narasaiah's central claim - it resulted in rapid growth of the Telugu film industry, and brought vast quantities of investments into it. He points out that in Vijayawada, which was the traditional centre for film distribution and the largest for Telugu after Madras even in the 1960s, distribution offices came down from 100 to 77. In the corresponding period the figure for Hyderabad reached 125 and distribution companies sprang up in a number of district headquarters across the state but also other towns in coastal Andhra (145-146).

As for exhibition, while ownership was almost always in the hands of individuals or small partnerships, the actual control was slipping out of the hands of distributors due to the fragmentation of distribution and the emergence of what came to be known as the district-wise 'buyer system' (Madhusudhana Rao 1981: 150). Exhibitors were now 'free' to demand weekly rentals from distributors instead of sharing the income on a 'percentage basis' as in the past. However, till the 1990s it is difficult to make the claim that any player in the exhibition sector controlled a significant number of exhibition outlets. Industry observers point out that in the 1990s Suresh Movies Film Distributors (owned D. Ramanaidu) and Mayuri Film Distributors (owned by Ch. Ramoji Rao, who presides over the media conglomerate that includes the Eenadu group of publications and television channels) had leased cinema halls in many cities of the state including Hyderabad. Mayuri also opened 19 distribution offices across Andhra Pradesh (Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber of Commerce 1995). The district-wise buyer system, according to Madhusudhana Rao, came from Tamil Nadu and its quick acceptance in Andhra Pradesh indicates that a region-wide industrial reorganization was occurring around this time. What exactly is the buyer system?

Whereas Telugu films in the 1950s often had only one distributor, by the late 1970s films began to be sold district-wise in regions where there were a

substantial number of cinema halls (parts of coastal Andhra, for example). One film magazine citing NTR's closest competitor in the 1970s, Krishna, reported that the very first film to have been sold 'outright' district-wise was *Bhale Dongalu* (K.S.R. Doss, 1976) featuring the latter in the lead (*Super Hit*, 4th July 2003). Interesting as this claim is, I do not wish to argue that NTR was in fact lagging behind Krishna by the mid-seventies. Staying with distribution for a while longer, by far, the most successful distributor to have emerged under the new order is Usha Pictures, in Eluru.<sup>[21]</sup> Some years ago the company claimed to have distributed 1017 films (*Super Hit*, 28th February 2003). This fragmentation process would be complete by the mid 1990s when distribution offices were opened in most district headquarters. In other words, distribution was becoming more localized than ever before. This was a critical development since distribution now begins to mop up ever increasing investments that eventually found their way into film production.

Fragmentation of distribution turned out to be a boon for film production. It was largely on the strength of the vastly expanded but fragmented distribution sector that a loss-making production sector made increasing numbers of films for close to two decades. Under the buyer system, locally generated surpluses from activities otherwise unrelated to the film industry such as agriculture and trade could go into bidding for the *pre-sale* of films under production, therefore providing the production sector with a major source of capital. While distributors had always advanced money to producers, the new system followed what the industry calls 'outright' sale, which was also completed while films were under production. Moreover distributors would bid for smaller territories than before (increasingly a single district). And there was no question of sharing of profits or losses between producers and distributors.

If films failed to recover costs, each distributor (by now known as the buyer) stood to lose money. There was a high attrition rate among distributors. But then there were also a number of new entrants maintaining the equilibrium. Often distributors would hedge their bets by finding sub-distributors within

their territory. Or a number of small investors would form a syndicate and bid for a territory. By the late nineties there were players in the distribution business who operated without offices. At the lowest end there were those who would bid for a single print of a film. Yet others specialized in supplying to second run cinema halls.

To say the least, the situation is complex and to the casual observer, chaotic. Fragmentation actually created a number of retail investors, if I may borrow a term from the stock market, in the distribution business. Older distribution companies like Poorna Pictures, whose sister concern also owns cinema halls in Vijayawada and Visakhapatnam, exited distribution of Telugu films and focussed on Hindi and English even as they refrained from outright purchase of rights.<sup>[22]</sup>

Not all producers had access to the money that was flowing into the industry from the distribution sector. Only a certain kind of producer was able to profitably engage in pre-sale of films. This was the maker of big-budget star vehicles. A number of smaller players found no 'buyers' for their films even after they were completed and Madhusudhana Rao (1981: 149), among other, draws attention to the fact that dozens of films were lying in cans for this reason. Yet other producers were forced to release their films on terms that were far from profitable.

This process is anticipated, facilitated and even willed into existence by the NTR brand of stardom. Narasiah makes the interesting comment that stars were deployed by producers to sell the film-not to viewers but distributors (1981: 146)! If the buyer system made distribution a major conduit for investments into production, the star's role was to flag projects worthy of investment. The star was thus indirectly responsible for mobilizing investment since it was often on the basis of the market worthiness of the star that films were sold.<sup>[23]</sup> The effect this kind of star had on the story is a predictable-films were more star centred than ever even as the protagonist acquired superhuman powers and became the absolute centre of the

narrative. A new spectatorial regime, which involved a high degree of trust on the star-protagonist and play with the *recognition* of his star status, which no doubt complemented his superhuman abilities to solve story-level problems, was put in place.<sup>[24]</sup>

A word of caution is due here: this kind of reliance on stars was much more a feature of the post-NTR period than ever before but my point is that it was NTR who laid the foundations. Not merely as actor but also as administrator when he introduced a new entertainment tax regime known as the 'slab system' in 1984.

The slab system is the name given by the industry to flat rates of entertainment tax that had to be paid regardless of the number of tickets sold. Across the country, a number of state governments instituted flat rates of taxation around this time. The government was therefore indirectly rewarding full houses because average tax per seat came down as the occupancy rate went up. Low occupancy rates could no longer be sustained for tax reasons alone. The slab system, introduced to discipline the distributor-exhibitor nexus which often under reported ticket sales, completed what I call the first moment of regression in the film industry's recent history. The mass film is the most significant outcome of this moment.<sup>[25]</sup>

I call this a moment of regression for two reasons. The first is the presence of feudal figures on screen. More importantly, the regression occurs at the level of industrial organization because the industry, especially the production sector, found itself in a position that allowed it to continue to produce loss making films but make them in larger numbers and bigger budgets than ever before. The scale of unproductive deployment of capital apart, the emerging order rendered useless measures aimed at ensuring that the industry at least recovered costs. Rajadhyaksha's phrase 'resistance to industrialization' (2003: 31) captures the larger process at work in the industry.

The timing of the arrival of the feudal patriarch on the Telugu screen is remarkable. Paradoxically, or perhaps not, New Indian Cinema had a great deal to do with the rise of the feudal patriarch. Firstly, there was the obsession of New Indian Cinema, from Shyam Benegal and Mrinal Sen to Gautam Ghosh, with finding authentic locations for feudal oppression. In fact, between Telangana and Bihar, the New Indian Cinema had found a perfect housing for contemporary feudalism. Surely the reopening of the feudalism question was a direct consequence of the wide-ranging critique of feudalism in the Telangana region launched by the naxalite movement and its sympathizers as well as the civil liberties movement. Here is a latter day example from the writings of K. Balagopal, the then secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee:

The [naxalite] struggle was mainly aimed against feudal social oppression which takes on a fantastic variety of forms in Telangana. *Vetti or Vettichakiri* (begar) in all its myriad manifestations is the most striking characteristic of feudalism in Telangana. Not only do the peasants perform 'unpaid' productive labour in the dora's fields, working people of all castes have to do *vetti*; toddy-tappers have to provide free toddy, potters have to give pots free, and so on right through the caste structure... More generally, any object (whether human or otherwise) that happens to catch the dora's fancy is his for the asking and taking (1988: 27).

Inserting a benevolent feudal lord into the context when such a critique is available is indeed a profoundly reactionary and courageous act, which was in fact possible by *othering* Telangana style feudalism. But that is another story.

Further, the increasing circulation of the critique as well as the cinematic precedent left behind by New Indian Cinema provided the backdrop for 'semi-realist' renditions of feudalism in commercial Telugu cinema.<sup>[26]</sup> These include Chiranjeevi's first film *Pranam Khareedu?* (What is the Price of a Life? K. Vasu, 1978), which is set in coastal Andhra but is clearly inspired by New

Indian Cinema in its attempt at realism as well as story level concern with feudal exploitation. There were also red-films, such as *Yuvataram Kadilindi* (Youth has Risen, Dhavala Satyam, 1980), associated with the actor Madala Ranga Rao, which dealt with the problems with the poor in general but on occasion dealt with feudal style oppression, even if the setting was not the countryside. These were low budget films, which were using a variety of new actors, some of who went on to become major stars. What is of significance is that they represented a model of film production that was quite different from the kind of films that NTR was associated with. For example, they did not follow the economic logic of the big-budget vehicle that had to be pre-sold district-wise in order to be made. To this day a number of 'small films,' the industry's term for low budget films, are distributed on a percentage basis. So the anti-feudal theme was in effect closely linked to a different model of film production.<sup>[27]</sup>

The situation apparently bore close resemblance with that Prasad describes in the Hindi film industry when Amitabh Bachchan was launched as an 'industrial star' (1998: 117-137). In both industries big budget star vehicles were assembled to suppress emerging models for reorganizing the industry. It is in fact possible to suggest that the significance of the Bombay developments were not lost on the Telugu industry and the re-launching of NTR was first attempted by remaking Bachchan vehicles with the older star in the lead. *Yugandhar* (K.S.R. Doss, 1979), the remake of *Don* (Chandra Barot, 1978), is by far the most successful of these films. These attempts met with varying degrees of success and were soon replaced by feudal patriarch films.

It is important to recognize that NTR was presiding over the assembling of a model that was so enduring that a variety of generic tendencies, or proto-genres, would eventually arrive at it. Chiranjeevi, for example, began his career in the semi-realist films of the late seventies but would end up exactly in the same kind of star vehicle and economic model that NTR had put in place. There is no distinction worthy of note between the kind of film production facilitated by Chiranjeevi, who was unwilling the centre of an anti-

Kamma, anti-NTR fan mobilization in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and Balakrishna, NTR's son who also inherited his fans' associations. Among other things, they both featured in big budget mass films, in spite of the significant difference in the themes of the film they came to be associated with in this period. The larger question this leads us to, and it is a question that can be taken back to Prasad's work on Bachchan as well, is whether the small film is in competition with the big budget film or a stepping stone to the real thing—for actors and technicians but also producers. Notice for example the ease with which Kranti Kumar, the producer of *Pranam Khareedu* moved on from semi-realist films to NTR's *Sardar Paparayudu* in two years' time. Dasari Narayana Rao, who directed this NTR vehicle too has a very similar trajectory. From low budget films of the mid-seventies he graduated to directing some of NTR's most successful and politically significant films.

We need to set aside the David-Goliath imaging of the small and big films and note that the feudal lord that NTR had helped create was the story end, as it were, of a production logic that involved, among other things, attracting new investments that were being routed through district-wise buyers. *This* was something the small films were incapable of doing.

What do we make of the cinematic production of the feudal? K. Balagopal, among others who have had much to say about NTR the politician, would have attributed it to the nature of capital—not merely the kind of surplus that was entering the film industry but more generally capital in India:

If Indian capital had had to depend upon its internal strength and dynamism for its self-expansion it would have been forced to contend with or destroy, or at least totally subsume, the pre-capitalist relations. But since it is not so constrained, and since its expansion is provided for by the State and by imperialism, it has never found it necessary to rid itself of pre-capitalist qualities (1988: 6).

Even if we agree that this is the larger picture, the immediate issue poses some interesting questions. The rural rich of coastal Andhra, especially those in the Krishna and Godavari delta regions, are likely to have been *indirectly* responsible for the surplus flowing into the film industry. Assuming that the district-wise buyer and the film star, two key players in my account, were but one step removed from agricultural surplus, and further assuming that this was precisely the kind of capital that had pre-capitalist qualities and that it worked, on the cultural front, to reproduce these qualities, an interesting story still remains to be told. NTR's films of the late 1970 and early 1980s actually draw our attention to precisely that untold story because the rural rich whose interests they are easily read as representing, had very tenuous claims if not outright fictitious claims, to being 'feudal'. Persistence of pre-capitalist tendencies, definitely. But where did feudalism come from? Popular cinema, of course.

Historically speaking the Krishna-Godavari delta region was not a region which had any significant presence of zamindars or their post-Independence inheritors who worked their way around the land ceiling act in other parts of the country. In the colonial era a majority of the Madras Presidency was under a ryotwari settlement (Maclean 1885: 103). There were 2.5 million ryots with an average of 8 acres each (Maclean 1885: 105). There were also 678 zamindars but only a fifth of the total area was under these zamindaris. Further, most of the large zamindaris of what is now Andhra Pradesh fell *outside* the Krishna-Godavari deltas. This is not to deny the critical importance of the princes of Bobbili and other zamindaris for the cultural construction of modern Andhra. Today's Telangana on the other hand constitutes the largest part of what was then the Nizam's Dominions, 'the principal tributary native state of India' (Maclean 1885: 10).

The ryots of the deltas prospered in the colonial as well as post-independence eras as Haragopal (1985) has pointed out. Balagopal has repeatedly stated that the NTR phenomenon is a part of a nation-wide rise of agricultural castes. Neither NTR as an individual nor the coastal Andhra rich

peasants of the 1980s could boast of a feudal past, glorious or otherwise. On the contrary the Krishna-Godavari delta area, NTR country in other words, supplied the communists who led the famous Telangana uprising against feudal oppression. Puchalapalli Sundaraiah of CPI (M) and Kondapalli Seetaramaiah of CPI (ML) People's War are among the leaders thrown up by the agrarian castes of coastal Andhra region who had much to contribute to the armed struggle in Telangana in the 1940s and 1980s respectively.

So something more than a return to the past was at work in Telugu cinema. How then do we read the return to public consciousness of Telangana's feudalism via the naxalite movement on the one hand and the production of a benevolent feudal patriarch on the other? Here is a tentative answer, which will no doubt be contested. It is pointless to read the NTR vehicle as a mere reaction-to the semi-realist film or to the naxalite movement or to the popular demand for a separate Telangana state in the late 1960s. No doubt it was a reaction but it nevertheless produced something new that was also deeply implicated in the politics of its time. NTR was not merely the cultural front end of transfer of power to agricultural castes, as Balagopal suggests. The NTR vehicle facilitates the disavowal of feudal oppression, not by denying that it existed but by creating the groundwork for a neat division between good and bad feudal lords. During NTR's own career there was also a regional, generic and industrial division between the two: the semi-realist film was given the task of representing Telangana and its equivalents in other regions. The desirable feudal qualities were to be found elsewhere: in another region, in another kind of film and represented by a star, the industry's biggest. Let us not forget that NTR was addressing an increasingly attentive Telangana (in the sense that the market for Telugu films was larger than ever before). But it was also a Telangana that had expressed a desire to end the geographical unity of the Telugu nation in the form of a popular movement whose betrayal by its leadership has in fact been read as an important cause for the rise of naxalism in the region.<sup>[28]</sup> The glue to integrate this region with the rest of the state was being created by NTR and

Telugu cinema: this was the missing centre that would hold the pieces together. In the fiction it was up to the NTR characters to pull together a disintegrating social. Off screen, it was the mandate of Telugu cinema to hold the Telugu nation together. After all it was just discovering the importance of Telangana. The screen was thus providing the leadership to unify the state under the sign of the patriarch. NTR was not far from the truth when he said he was a communist. For it was the communists who played a major role in the creation of the state of Andhra Pradesh.<sup>[29]</sup> And just when the sutures were coming apart, NTR stepped in.

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## References:

1 Although there is a considerable degree of overlap between the later NTR starrers and the mass film, I would like to use the term to refer to films that were made *without* NTR. What unifies the films under this category is not just the film industry's use of the term mass film (since the eighties) to describe big budget star vehicles. There is an obviousness to the term mass film: by common consensus these are big budget star vehicles with lavish song sequences, excellently choreographed action sequences by local standards, characterized by poor taste, presumably addressing lower class-caste 'masses' and so on. We need to understand that the mass film emerged in the wake of NTR's exit from the film industry. The industry had to cobble together a new form to deal with the exit of its most successful star and reliable source of income. It did so by further developing the hugely successful formula that was assembled around the star-persona of NTR in the late seventies and eighties. Mobilization, as in the last pre-Telugu Desam Party films of NTR, is a central concern of the mass film. The mass film mobilizes the masses, via the star-protagonist, against the enemies of state and society. It is a prime example of what Madhava Prasad, discussing another context, calls the *aesthetic of mobilization* at work (Prasad 1998: 138-159).

2 I am not referring to differences between Telugu and Hindi films. I am drawing on Ashish Rajadhyaksha's notion of Bollywoodization to make a distinction between the traditional market for films and the emerging market for a range of cultural goods that are spun off or sourced from films, past and present, but may not have anything to do with filmviewing and related cinephiliac activities. Rajadhyaksha proposes, 'If then, we see Bollywood as a culture industry, and see the Indian cinema as only a part, even if culturally a significant one, of that industry, then it is also likely that we are speaking of an industry whose financial turnover is many times larger than what the cinema itself can claim (2003: 30).' He also points out that the absorption of cinema into the production of diasporic nationalism and the production of nostalgia for 'our national culture' as a key facilitator of Bollywoodization of Hindi cinema.

[3](#) Notice for example the reportage of Telugu film trade journals and magazines on the industry's 'All time hit' *Pokiri* (Puri Jagannath, 2006). Puri Jagannath and the film's male lead Mahesh Babu, both of whom also had major stakes in the companies that co-produced the film, as well as film magazines in general referred overwhelmingly to *Pokiri*'s box-office takings ('100 days in 200 centres', etc). Conspicuously absent in the news and advertising of the film is the reference to any other source of revenue, except a passing reference to the sale remake rights in other languages. See for example Puri Jagannath's interview in *Super Hit*, 31st August 2006. This issue of the magazine, whose issues actually hit the stands one month ahead of the publication date, also carried a full page advertisement listing all 200 cinema halls where the film apparently ran for a hundred days and claiming that this film had created an, 'All time Indian Silver Screen Record.'

[4](#) For well over a decade now stars have been spoken of as being under imagi chatram. In Telugu film journalism the image's shadow refers to the (male) star's inability to move beyond familiar roles in formulaic films. This line of criticism assumed significance only because major stars were repeatedly failing in familiar roles and when they attempted to foreground their acting skills or were featured in 'off-beat' films it proved to be commercially disastrous. What can be more conclusive evidence that stars were indeed trapped in images of their own making? Fortunately for the industry's biggest stars Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna, by the late 1990s they were once again back in business, and everyone forgot about the image trap, but the discussion resurfaces each time a star goes through a bad patch. See Srinivas 1997 for a detailed discussion of Chiranjeevi's genre crossings and experiments with realistic, 'socially purposeful' cinema.

[5](#) I have in mind, among other examples, the work of Ram Gopal Varma, who began his career in Telugu with *Siva* (1989) and has been serially producing 'genre' films in Hindi. Interestingly, he had agreed to do a film with Chiranjeevi in the late 1990s but the project did not take off. It was reported in the Telugu film press that between them the star and the director could not come to an agreement on the story. This was perhaps the earliest sign that the major stars of the Telugu industry were going to remain unavailable for 'factory' style film production for some years to come.

[6](#) Telugu films do not usually have official English titles. I provide rough English translations of the titles of key films to provide a sense of their meaning.

[7](#) This film is profoundly ironic. Venkatesh is related to the Kamma leaders who allegedly masterminded the murderous mob attack on the Dalit hamlet in Karamchedu village in 1986.

[8](#) Faction is the name given to the groupings of the political elites of this region, which have a history of violent conflict. The Rayalaseema faction came to the notice of the rest of the state when their violent methods of gaining political ascendancy spilt over to Hyderabad under NTR's chief ministership in the 1980s. Balagopal draws attention to this development (1988: 217). I will have more to say about the Rayalaseema faction presently.

[9](#) *Antahpuram* does not follow this familiar route and instead makes the eruption of the feudal into the lives of the nuclear family the basis for a new form. Indeed, its novelty and deviation was its USP.

[10](#) The Telugu film press and film industry tend to use the faction film to describe all films which are set against the 'backdrop of factionism.' This would imply that *Antahpuram* and the faction films of big stars that I discuss below could be lumped together. In spite of the continuities in their representation of the region, it is pointless to group together an avowed deviation from the mass film like *Antahpuram* and others which are attempting to revive the mass film. It is the latter set of films that I refer to by the 'faction film.' The films that I categorize thus have thematic and formal similarities and also follow the same production-distribution-exhibition logic as each other as well as the mass film in general.

[11](#) See Balagopal 2004 for an excellent account for the factionists of Rayalaseema in general and Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhar Reddy's rise to prominence.

[12](#) This view has been expressed by the contributors to Sastry 1986. One of the contributors states that this was the period of crime films inspired by the James Bond series and other 'formula' films. They are said to have 'heralded the advent of cabaret dances in Telugu films'. In addition, this author adds, the obscene 'comedy track' and the 'vamp' are contributions of this moment. As a result, 'The sixties saw very few meaningful films being produced, even as commercial successes were completely blotting realism' (Kannala 1986: 29).

[13](#) The class film and mass film rose to prominence in the 1980s mirroring and complementing each other. By the late 1980s the class film had become such an important source of critical and state approval (in the form of awards) that major stars like Chiranjeevi went out of their way to produce as well as act in class film, which went on win awards at the state and national level. This star acted in Vishwanath's *Swayamkrish* (Self Help, 1987) and *Aapadbandhavudu* (Friend in Need, 1992) while his production company made *Rudraveena* (K. Balachander, 1988). The latter film won the Nargis Dutt Award for National Integration.

[14](#) *Devata* (Angel, K. Hemambharadhara Rao, 1964) provides an interesting example of the powerless patriarch. The father of the hero (NTR), and more importantly the father-in-law of the heroine (Savitri), who is the narrative centre of the film, is a retired old man (Nagaiah) whose presence is purely symbolic. He has no real authority and is presented as a helpless old man. He and wife, along with the school-going child of the lead pair, have to be *protected from the truth*, that the daughter-in-law is dead. This was in complete contrast to the power that the patriarch began to wield in the 1970s Telugu films.

[15](#) Venkata Rao claims in his biography of NTR that the very first time that NTR made public his desire to enter politics was during the shooting of *Sardar Paparayudu* (2000: 37-38). There is popular story that NTR told a group of journalists who were curious to know about his political agenda that it was all laid out in *Bobbili Puli*.

[16](#) L.V. Prasad, NTR, Krishna, Nageswara Rao, D. Ramanaidu were among those who acquired film industry related real estate in the sixties and seventies.

[17](#) In a recent interview Ramanaidu claimed that he left his village for Madras in 1962 with Rs. 118,000 to become a producer. *Andhra Jyothi*, 6th June 2006, 'Chitra Jyothi,' p. IV.

[18](#) I am drawing on the work of S. Ananth, PhD student, Department of History, University of Hyderabad, whose PhD project looks at the post-independence economic history of the coastal Andhra region. See also Ananth 2006 for an account of unofficial stock exchanges in Vijayawada, which among other things, channelled local agricultural and trade surplus into the national financial markets.

[19](#) Bellary district, Karnataka, with 15 cinema halls was so integral a part of the Telugu film market that it was listed along with the other districts of Andhra Pradesh.

[20](#) The Indian film industry and various state governments make a distinction between permanent, touring cinemas. The first are brick/concrete structures while the latter are temporary structures (tents or zinc sheds) which are expected to move from place to place. This is the distinction that the Souvenir maintains while providing the break-up.

[21](#) An advertisement (in Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber of Commerce 1981) states that the company was established in 1974. Eluru is in West Godavari district, which had 168 permanent cinema halls and 76 touring cinemas, the second highest in the state in the 1990s (*Andhra Pradesh Film Diary* 1995, pp. 24-32).

[22](#) Observations about distribution are based on the field work conducted among distributors in Tirupathi, Hyderabad and Vijayawada in 2001-2002. Some of the findings have been published in Srinivas 2003.

[23](#) Madhusudhana Rao claims there were only two other criteria that distributors were looking for: expensive sets and flashy music (149).

[24](#) See Srinivas 2006 for a detailed discussion of the kind of spectatorship that the late 1970s and early 1980s vehicles put in place.

[25](#) The slab system has been blamed for a number of ills of the industry and as such we need to be cautious about explaining away complex developments by blaming the taxation policy alone. It is however a fact that in the recent past the exhibition sector has faced a severe crisis and has witnessed the closure of around 500 cinema halls. There was a roll back of the slab system in 2005 and some of the cinema halls that were closed reopened once again. For an account of developments in the industry after the lifting of the slab system see Rental 2005.

[26](#) 'Semi-realist films' is the term used by Megastar Chiranjeevi in an interview with the author (Chennai, 22nd January 1995) to describe his early work, which belongs to the category of films that I am referring to here.

[27](#) It would certainly be an exaggeration to claim that the anti-feudal theme that New Indian Cinema inspired exhausted the small films of the period. There were comedies and romances, including those dubbed from Tamil that were so popular that both Rajnikanth and Kamal Haasan became major stars in Telugu. And there was of course the emergent class film.

[28](#) Keshav Rao Jadhav says, 'The Naxalite movement itself was a product of the betrayal of the 1968-1972 movement as also tardy implementation of land reforms by the Coastal area-Royalaseema feudal coalition.' (1997: 7).

[29](#) While this is certainly not the place to enter into a discussion on the formation of Andhra Pradesh, it is useful to note that the Andhra communists played a critical role in the formation of the state. The debate on the formation of the state has in fact been reopened in the 1990s when renewed demands began to be made for the formation of a separate Telangana state. I. Thirumali has this fascinating comment virtually accusing the communists of thrusting unification on the people of Telangana:

The Communist Party, having enough strength in the Andhra Assembly and Hyderabad state Assembly, brought enormous pressure on the central leadership. P. Sunderaiah and C. Rajeswar Rao worked hard in Andhra and Delhi immediately after Faizal Ali recommendations were found to be against Vishalandhra [Greater Andhra, the communist term for a unified Andhra state]... Every political party claimed that it had mass support, and was in accordance with the wishes of Telangana people. The masses did not even know what Vishalandhra was. Border village people felt joining 'company' was Vishalandhra, but did not understand what it was. Central Telangana people thought Vishalandhra was a religion (1997: 23).

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