

# Embodied Engagements: Filmmaking and Viewing Practices and the *Habitus* of Telugu Cinema

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## Abstract

Viewers of South Indian devotional films, female viewers in particular, have been known to offer prayers to the gods on screen and even moved to a state of possession while watching a film. Filmmaking and publicity try to highlight this aspect and explicitly address the spectator as a devotee. How do we understand these intersections between film viewership and religious practice? How do we theorize the figure of the viewer who is both a film viewer and a devotee at the same time? What sort of embodied engagements characterize these overlapping positions? Does affective engagement necessarily preclude critical and rational engagement with the narrative? This article explores these questions through an examination of the practices that surrounded the production and the reception of Telugu devotional films in the period starting roughly from the 1970s to the mid-2000s. I argue that a close attention to the *habitus* of the film viewer will enable a deeper and finer appreciation of the sensory modes of film appreciation that viewers bring to the cinema. Equal attention to the changing practices and the *habitus* of filmmaking in South India enables us to grapple with the ways in which a traditional *habitus* responds and changes with the advent of modern media and modern ways of thinking and being.

## Keywords

Devotional film, *habitus*, sensory anthropology, South Indian cinema, female spectatorship, viewing practices, filmmaking practices

[A]s 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, the producer is a happy man... 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 a *pativrata*. Respect the Sita, Savitri and Sumati who rebel. Only then will we get good cinema.<sup>1</sup> (Seeta Devi, 1976)

This extract from an article by well-known writer Vasireddi Seeta Devi was among the many trenchant criticisms of Telugu cinema by the women writers of the 1970s and the 1980s. It gives us a sense of the prevailing arguments, mood, and tone of the women's movement in India and in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>2</sup> In all these writings, women were exhorted to give up their tendency to weep easily and to evolve a critical outlook toward all sentiments that sought to secure their subordination. The 1980s and the early 1990s witnessed the flowering of a powerful feminist literature and movement.

However, the feminist as well as the more general critique of popular sentiments in cinema was faced with a challenge from a new genre in the 1980s South Indian cinema. The increasing popularity of the B-grade genre of the goddess film not only seemed to draw upon the energies of the feminist and Dalit movements but also posed many new questions for them.<sup>3</sup> A goddess film featured a female protagonist and valorized the lower caste village goddesses in a way earlier films had not. At the same time, the form of the melodrama evident in the earlier genre of *sati/pativrata* films was retained and even taken to a heightened pitch.<sup>4</sup> More intriguing and a cause for anxiety and puzzlement were the reports about female viewers getting possessed while watching these films.

Classic realism in Western cinema 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, p. 7). Elsewhere, she argues that this presumption of a disembodied citizen-spectator is challenged by genres, such as 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 grounded studies of spectatorship and cinematic reception rather than an effort to produce an overarching theory of *the* cinematic spectator.

In the context of the Indian cinema, and of devotional films in particular, 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, as mentioned above, is even moved to a state of possession. Filmmaking and publicity try to highlight this aspect and explicitly address the spectator as a devotee. One of the common practices in Telugu cinema has been the setting up of makeshift shrines in the premises of film theaters 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. In other words, the viewer is solicited to occupy the position of a devotee rather than a mere spectator. How do we understand these intersections between film viewership and religious practice? How can we theorize the figure of the viewer who is both a film viewer and a devotee at the same time? What sort of embodied engagements characterize these overlapping positions? Does affective engagement

necessarily preclude critical and rational engagement with the narrative? This article explores these questions through an examination of the practices that surrounded the production and the reception of Telugu devotional films in the period starting roughly from the 1970s to the mid-2000s.

## Anthropology of the Sensorium and the Media

A number of recent anthropological studies have dealt with issues of sensory perception and the embodied corporeal nature of engagement with modern forms of media (Buck-Morss, 1994; Hirschkind, 2006; Jain, 2007; Larkin, 2008; Hirschkind & Larkin, 2008; Pinney, 2004; Seremetakis, 1994). These works provide important conceptual tools to understand the overlap between the spectator and the devotee. Commenting on the relation between media and religion, Charles Hirschkind and Brian Larkin (2008) observe that this relation can be studied following two lines of inquiry. 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 associated practices of filmmaking and viewing, 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 audiovisual technologies have also been used in the individual cultivation of piety or in establishing a religious community. The independent circulation of film songs is an excellent example. Often, devotional songs from films plucked away from particular narratives find a new habitation in auditory circuits of piety. They become part of the aural archive of songs that are sung by devotees or broadcast at temples, at public festivals, in the news media, and in the homes of the devout.

Coming back to the film viewer, many of the embodied responses, such as praying, singing, and entering a trance while watching a film, affirm what Christopher Pinney has called "corporetics": 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). At the same time, 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 which include film criticism, publicity, and film censorship to name just a few of the more institutionalized discourses. 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, an important element of film criticism has been the pedagogic role of educating viewers to be modern, critical subjects.

The second line of enquiry that Larkin and Hirschkind identify examines the circulatory modes through which religious publics are constituted. This does not indicate a shift in focus from religion to politics. Rather, 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. Might it not be more productive to track the intersections and crossovers that we may glimpse

between the two lines of enquiry? Using the idea of *habitus* as elaborated by the anthropologist Talal Asad, I wish to examine the conditions within which certain kinds of viewership practices might be forged.<sup>5</sup> A close attention to the *habitus* of the film viewer will enable a deeper and finer appreciation of the sensory modes of film appreciation that viewers bring to the cinema. However, the end of this inquiry is not simply to demonstrate the culturally distinct orientations of Indian or Telugu viewers. Rather, a central theoretical preoccupation of this article is to think through the question—In what ways does a traditional *habitus* respond and change with the advent of modern media and modern ways of thinking and being?

In the following pages, I argue that the discourses of filmmaking 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. 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 interrelated issues, I draw upon writings on cinema as well as interview with a couple of filmmakers. I hope to demonstrate that viewers are formed within the matrix of embodied modes of being that are culturally and historically determined.

## The Goddess Film and the Possessed Spectator

The 1970s onwards, the male spectator of Telugu cinema gets profiled as rowdy and the female spectator is believed to be superstitious and mired in unnecessary religiosity and sentimentalism. The increasing popularity of the goddess films provoked a debate in the public sphere about the reports of possessions in theaters. Press reports bemoaned the irrationality and superstitious nature of the female viewers even as they dismissed such reports as false and misleading publicity by filmmakers. Reviewers of the films wondered how “irreligious” aspects, such as erotic dances and violent fights, could be justified in the so-called devotional films. Following the success of the film *Ammoru* (Kodi Ramakrishna, 1995) 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’s 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.<sup>6</sup> He added, “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.”<sup>7</sup>

The film poster of a popular Tamil goddess film exemplifies this thinking very well (see Image 1).<sup>8</sup> 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 photograph of a crowd of “real” spectators all of whom had presumably gathered to watch the film.<sup>9</sup> In the foreground of this crowd is 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



**Image 1.** Poster of the Tamil devotional film *Rajakali Amman* (Rama Narayanan, 2000). depicting the film's goddess blessing a possessed viewer

Courtesy of CSCS Archive, Bengaluru.

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 acknowledgment of her devotion.

Thus, 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 an ideal spectator in film publicity. Despite this, in the mid-2000s when I conducted fieldwork, 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 neighbors. In the admittedly few attempts I made at interviewing lower-class/caste women, it was difficult for me 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 viewer who allows the power of cinema to possess her seems to be more a specter that haunts and threatens the modern ideal spectator rather than an actual figure. And yet, I believe it is worth our while to explore this phenomenon of the possessed viewer. It is one of the modern spectator's doubles and shares much with that other figure that causes anxiety—the male fan. The work of Madhava Prasad and S.V. Srinivas provides us with a textured and insightful understanding of this figure's investment in politics (Prasad, 2014; Srinivas, 2006).

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. Questioning the argument that male fans are passive and submissive subalterns who mistake the star for God, they suggest a different way of exploring the dynamic of this relationship and by extension the relation between South Indian cinema and politics. Through a rich ethnography of activities of fans of the Telugu film star Chiranjeevi, Srinivas argues:

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. (Srinivas, 2006, p. 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. He states,

We must avoid assuming that the elements that go into making the performance of bhakti are in themselves embodiments of a fixed idea of religious worship. Thus when Rajnikanth's fans poured milk over cut-outs of the star; they were clearly borrowing a practice of consecration of the icon from temple culture. An obvious answer offers itself. But we must learn to see the practice of star worship as an independent site of enthusiasm which derives elements of its own culture of worship from other sources, but is not therefore reducible to these latter. (Prasad, 2014, p. 174)

He calls this new form of *bhakti*, fan *bhakti* and argues that it is an entirely political activity. It is a manifestation of the crisis of sovereignty in India where popular sovereignty although declared has not been actualized.

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 [as film stars] for any chance of a share in collective sovereignty. (Prasad, 2014, p. 182)

Fan bhakti 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.

A great part of Prasad's critical labor is directed toward separating the political enthusiasm of the fans from the religious enthusiasm suggested by the term *bhakti*. His work strains against tendencies 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, and motives is always disavowed. He argues persuasively that several concepts in India have gradually acquired new shades of meaning and that the old Indological approach that seeks to uncover the underlying original/essential meanings of terms in order to better appreciate the culture of India is mistaken in its assumption of the continuity of tradition. In this regard, his work is undoubtedly an important corrective.

However, I wonder what is lost or missed out in this case to distinguish and rescue the properly "political" from the properly "religious." For instance, how do we

understand the politics of religion and the religious idioms employed in contemporary politics? 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 legalized 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 media. More pertinent to the discussion at hand are the viewer responses to religious films. Therefore, while I agree that the Chiranjeevi or Rajnikanth fan is not religious minded, I 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 into organized politics. Moreover, the moment of possession is itself random and fleeting, seldom does it extend beyond the confines of the cinema theater. 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. 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 some strands of 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. Audience participation of various kinds, including physical responses that range from clapping, whistling, and hooting to weeping, praying, and being possessed by deities, have been noted. Indeed, ritual performances combine art and piety effortlessly (Jain, 2010; Kapur, 1990). Thus, audiences carry with them to the cinema a *habitus*, that is, embodied dispositions and sensibilities cultivated in these traditional contexts.

### **A Lower-caste Telugu *Habitus***

Although many scholars trace the concept of *habitus* to Aristotle's work, in modern social theory it is best known through the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu.

However, shifting away from Bourdieu's use of the concept, Talal Asad turns to an earlier anthropologist Marcel Mauss for whom *habitus* was "an embodied capacity that is more than physical ability in that it also includes cultivated sensibilities and passions, an orchestration of the senses" (Asad, 2003, p. 95). For Asad, this understanding of *habitus* provides us with a useful way of thinking about the role of the subject in the cultivation of her own body and its aptitudes. He argues

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, p. 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 experiences. Such an understanding alerts us to the problematic assumptions that govern secular modern conceptions of agency as disembodied reflexive reason. It also, thereby, challenges a particular conception of what constitutes the properly "political" derived from liberal notions of the individual and opens up a productive line of thinking about viewer responses to cinema.

Kirthana Thangavelu's study of the painted scrolls used in folk performative traditions of Telangana offers us an insightful account of the particular *habitus* that Telugu viewers bring to the cinema (Thangavelu, 1998). 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 mode of ritual storytelling. 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, p. 288).

Painted scrolls used in performing local myths of the lower castes, Shudras, and untouchable castes in Telangana present us with a fascinating example of extant audiovisual traditions of performances other than cinema and electronic media. During the extended storytelling sessions, 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 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.

Thangavelu's dissertation closely examines the commissioning and execution of a painted scroll to be used for a performance of the *Madel puranamu*, a *jati purana* (a caste purana) of the washerman caste, a Shudra caste. In her study of the viewership practices attending these storytelling sessions, Thangavelu narrates two episodes that are of particular interest to us. They display the complex ways in which the agency of the female audience witnessing the *Madel puranamu* was forged. While one instance



might be straightforwardly described as their resistance to, and challenging of the performers' sexist remarks about modern women, the second instance is an example of how their religious subjectivity comes to the fore.

The oral retelling renders an old myth contemporary through many performative practices, such as the insertion of commentary on the proceedings of the story, the context of the performance, and at times, on contemporary social or political events. Continuing this tradition, the *Madel puranamu* narrators make several comments of all kinds to enliven the proceedings and sustain audience interest. Commenting on women is a favorite topic. The storytellers digress far from the main story to ridicule modern women who wear lipstick and polyester blouses and stand 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 storytellers stop this commentary and return to the main story (Thangavelu, 1998, pp. 170–175). There is an angry exchange of words between the women and the storytellers. After a brief pause, the narrators were forced to return to the main story. The episode is significant for two reasons. It reveals not only 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 did not mean that they would not interrupt or challenge it in any way. They took strong objection to 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. The next day, the unveiling of the Veerabhadra figure was preceded by ritual preparations, such as burning incense, waving neem leaves, and vigorous drumming. The drumming led to the possession of a woman who began to dance and shriek and was soon joined by other women who danced and welcomed the god on the scroll. Thangavelu argues that this episode demonstrates:

...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, pp. 179–180)

She states further that for the duration of the performance, the scroll becomes a mobile temple. Jyotindra Jain's article on how religious scrolls and maps are not just representations of sacred places but are themselves recreations of the space of the shrine and worship also reinforces this argument (Jain, 2010). Thus, the women who dance or become possessed are not simply blindly superstitious, nor does their religiosity make them slaves to tradition and immune to the rational world.

Myths 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 but the space of performance also changes. Unlike the

organic community of caste-specific folk performances, the modern anonymous mass public that views cinema is of a very different nature. Therefore, one cannot look for continuities alone, but must carefully note how new technologies and new publics affect the making and viewing of religious films.

## Debating Disciplines in Telugu Cinema

In this section, I continue my reflections on affect and embodiment from the point of view of filmmakers, more specifically, the director and producer of one successful goddess film. Through this reverse shot, as it were, I hope to bring into view the diversity of perceptions and changing practices within the film industry. In theoretical terms, this focus is a genealogical approach to the practices within film production.

Drawing on Foucault's studies and alluding to Asad's work as well on discipline, Partha Chatterjee has 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:

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, p. 335)

At the same time, he cautions "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, p. 336). Hence, the following two sections track the debates within the disciplinary field of cinema.

## The Force of Cinema: Invoking the Goddess through Sound and Image

Recounting the experience that inspired him to make the film, *Ammoru*, Shyam Prasad Reddy, the producer of the film, 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 fascinating in the way it details the coming together of a recognition of the affective power of ritual and the efforts to materialize that power through the medium of cinema. The process of recreating sound through the mediation of recording technologies is extremely interesting. The space of the recording studio was too constricting and failed to create the right mood for the drummers who needed to partially recreate the atmosphere of the festival. Nighttime and an open space 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 theater too. In the 1990s, many theaters in Andhra Pradesh began to equip themselves with the Digital Theatre Sound (DTS) system. 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 traveled all around and created a soundscape within which the viewer was seated. This new technology coupled with practices in the theater 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 sensations it seeks to create in the bodies of spectators. As S.V. Srinivas has argued, most goddess films seek to recreate a specific moment of possession—the *poonakam* song. 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 theater 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 (Srinivas, n.d.). The force of cinema in invoking the goddess is supplemented by these off-screen efforts. Thus, the combined efficacy of the on-screen and off-screen production of the ritual context actualizes the presence of the goddess in the space of the theater and provokes heightened affective states like possession.

## Performing Deities and Devotees

In her ethnography of the traditional Ramlila performance, Anuradha Kapur gives us a detailed account of the rigorous bodily training that the young performers of the

Ramlila undergo in order to achieve the correct posture and clear enunciation that is the hallmark of a good performer (Kapur, 1990). Many other performative traditions in India too require the performer not only to perfect their particular skills but also to adopt certain general practices of physical exercise, dietary restrictions, and also emotional control to mold and shape their bodies into instruments of art. Such practices have carried over to the modern stage and cinema. Hence, it is not surprising to hear accounts of actors claiming the adoption of certain ascetic practices and a general regimen of abstinence from alcohol, sex, spicy food, aggressive behavior, and so on. Only a disciplined body it is believed becomes a fit vessel, *patra*, for a saintly character to take shape within it or a divine character to be materialized through it.

The cinema, as we have already discussed, makes different demands on the actor than the stage. Highly successful stage actors famed for their acting and singing skills failed to make the same impact on the cinema screen. Moreover, with the technology of playback singing, the singing actors lost their preeminent position and even those who could not sing were now able to play lead roles. Therefore, in the 1950s, a new set of actors became popular in both mythological and social films, chief among them being N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), S.V. Ranga Rao, Savithri, and A. Nageswara Rao. The only requirement now for the actor was his or her ability to “look” the part and, even more importantly, to deliver lengthy and lofty monologues effortlessly and to enact with the right expressions and gestures the singing of *padyalu* or metrical verses. Nevertheless, there are stories that circulated about specific techniques adopted by individual actors in preparation for mythological roles. In several biographies of NTR, the biographers tell us of the dietary restrictions that the actor adopted as part of his preparation (Venkata Rao, 2000). For example, he would follow a strict vegetarian diet while playing the roles of gods, such as Rama, Krishna, and Venkateswara. While playing the roles of demons or negative characters, such as Ravana and Duryodhana, he would adopt a meat diet in order to build up emotions, such as 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.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, for our discussion, it is sufficient 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 for 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 is the belief in the links between diet and mental state and capabilities for performance of certain roles.

The popular actor of the 1940s and the 1950s, Nagayya (best known for his portrayal of saint figures) recounts the way in which he trained for the role of the eighteenth-century saint-composer Tyagayya. His rigorous practice of music lessons was augmented by his belief in god and the blessings he received from different holy men during the course of his life (Nagayya, 2004). Until very recently, it was not uncommon for actors performing mythological roles to state that they had been practicing various physical disciplines, such as the adoption of a vegetarian diet, abstinence from smoking and alcohol, and a conscious effort to avoid negative emotions, such as anger, pride, jealousy, and envy.

This does not mean that a general piety and religiosity pervaded the making of mythological 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 was mentioned. For example, a contemporary of NTR, A. Nageswara Rao (popularly known as ANR) was publicly known to be a non-religious person. He was acclaimed for his roles in social films but also excelled in mythologicals and earned special praise for his portrayal of a devotee, *bhakta*, in the film *Vipra Narayana* (R. Rao, 1954). In his memoirs, ANR recounts his conversation on this subject with the well-known director, K.V. Reddi (N. 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. But ANR argued that one need not actually *be* the character 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.

A. Nageswara Rao makes an even more interesting observation. He tells K.V. Reddi, "You made *Bhakta Potana* with Nagayya. Let us watch that film together. I will make a note of how Nagayya portrayed the role and learn from it" (N. Rao, 2005, pp. 37–38). Not only is ANR convinced that the external bodily posture, physical gestures, and style of speech are 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 on screen 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.

## The Space of Cinema: Then and Now

Perhaps for the first time in the history of Telugu cinema, the film *Sri Venkateswara Mahatyam* (Pullaiah, 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 theaters screening the film and the viewing of the film was itself offered as a substitute for a visit to the temple town of 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 filmmakers and exhibitors of almost all subsequent devotionals. Therefore, a temporary shrine erected within the theater premises invites the viewers to first get a *darshan* of the idol placed there and then to enter the theater to see the film. Sometimes, these shrines have elaborate arrangements, such as 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 theaters during the 1980s when I was in my teens. Most viewers, including myself, my family, and friends, made it a point to stop at these idols and pay our respects to them.

Reddy, the producer of *Ammoru* commissioned the making of idols that were replicas of the idol in the film and these were sent to theaters all around the state. The money that was collected at these makeshift shrines 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 theater management’s initiative and were therefore more dispersed and decentralized affairs. It is possible to understand this practice merely as a publicity technique used by the filmmakers to promote the film amongst a religious public. But that would be to assume that such a public already exists and that the films address it. On the contrary, I would argue, it is through its mode of address that the film constitutes its public as a religious one. This understanding also allows for the possibility that this address might often be only partially realized or at times even fail altogether. Thus, when I went to watch the devotional film *Trinetram* (Kodi Ramakrishna, 2003) at Sri Mayuri Theater in Hyderabad, there was no arrangement of an idol or shrine. The film itself was poorly attended and was soon declared a flop. A few years later, when I went to Radhika Cinema in Secunderabad to watch *Sri Ramadasu* (Raghavendra Rao, 2006), idols of Rama, Seeta, and Lakshmana were set up for worship in a corner but most viewers paid scant attention to them. The decline of the genre itself and the “disinterest” of the audience can be partly explained by the changing space of the cinema hall and of viewing practices too.

Until the 1990s, most towns of Andhra Pradesh had single-screen theaters. Very few of them were air-conditioned, most were air-cooled or managed with ceiling fans. Many still had a graded ticket price and offered affordable entertainment to poor and working-class men and women. Genres like the women’s melodrama and the devotional were patronized by largely female audience which meant that the space of the theater offered a kind of anonymous intimacy making possible certain kinds of engagements with the images on screen. But a different scenario is now in place. On the one hand, cinema viewing is becoming an individualized activity with the many private platforms of viewing now available through DVDs, television, the Internet, and even mobile phones. On the other hand, the space of cinema too has changed. Since the late 1990s and more so in the 2000s, as cinema halls are increasingly embedded in malls and multiplexes, the practices of cinema viewing too are altered in significant ways. Cinema viewing is made part of a variety of acts of consumption—eating, shopping, and gaming. It is hard, therefore, to imagine earlier modes of embodied engagement with the cinema. This is hardly to argue that cinema is no longer an affective medium. On the contrary, it continues to be one, only the pleasures and thrills that it offers are of a very different kind. And these new pleasures demand the cultivation of a new *habitus*.

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## Notes

1. Translated from Telugu and reprinted in the dossier prepared for the “Workshop on Telugu Cinema: History, Culture, Theory” August 13–16, 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). 1975–1985 was declared as the International Decade for Women by the United Nations.
2. For a sample of such writings in English translation, see the dossier (1999) cited above. See especially pp. 78–84.
3. For a brief discussion of this genre, see Bhrugubanda (2014).
4. For a detailed discussion of the sati genre of films, see Bhrugubanda (2011).
5. 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 as will become clear later on in my article.
6. 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. Srinivas in his unpublished work on the Telugu devotionals refers to several Telugu newspaper articles that report possessions in theaters in the 1990s.
7. Personal Interviews with film producer, Shyam Prasad Reddy, and film director, Kodi Ramakrishna, conducted on October 23, 2006.
8. A number of devotional films were dubbed from Tamil to Telugu and vice versa. So there is a shared history which allows us to theorize the South Indian devotional film as a genre with particular characteristics.
9. 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 Figure 1.
10. It is this hegemonic conception that has led to the informal ban on depicting lead characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as meat eaters in the Telugu mythologicals. Only demons are shown to be meat eaters. For an excellent overview of the history and politics of vegetarianism in India, see Roy (2010).

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