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After NTR
Telugu Mass Film and Cinematic Populism

In the previous chapter, I discussed the critical importance of the social history of the cinema hall. Now I will focus on films, which are, after all, the reason why the populace gathers before the screen. In my examination of the films of Chiranjeevi, I will ask if there is anything at all in these films that can give us insights into the 'excessive' responses we encountered in the previous chapter. While I have suggested that these responses are usefully located as cinephiliac, the task of demonstrating their relationship to the screen remains.

In this chapter and the rest of the book, I examine the Telugu film 'genre' locally known as the mass film, which was, by far, the most influential and economically important genre in the Telugu film industry in the 1980s and 1990s. Chiranjeevi is closely identified with the mass film but all other major Telugu stars of his generation featured in films of this genre. The mass film is useful for opening up the question of how the cinema may be political. This question will be an important focus of my discussion of the genre. Furthermore, in the mid-1990s the mass film and its stars became a part of a major crisis in the Telugu film industry. The crisis was, in part, a result of the collapse of the mass film, as also its past success. The examination of the mass film allows us to see how populism and blockage dovetail and in turn implicate Telugu cinema's superstars.

This chapter is in two parts. In the first, I discuss mass film's formal and thematic concerns, while drawing attention to Chiranjeevi's rise from a minor actor to the industry's biggest star. In the second part, I will make an argument about populism immanent to the cinema, once again

focusing on the mass film. Throughout the discussion, Chiranjeevi's career will provide the examples that support the argument. However, while Chiranjeevi is critical for the argument, the argument itself is about film spectatorship as the key to the working of populist cinema.

The Mass Film

The study of the 'Chiranjeevi phenomenon', in its screen manifestation, is a study of the mass film. Situating the star against the backdrop of the mass film also allows me to avoid individualizing him and making an exception of him. On the contrary, I would like to argue that Chiranjeevi is very much a product of his times and has much in common with stars who came before and after him. Just as the Chiranjeevi fan would have much in common with the Balakrishna fan, the 'Chiranjeevi film' and 'Balakrishna film', in spite of their distinguishing features, would be remarkably similar. To begin with, they are likely to be mass films.

It is useful to divide Chiranjeevi's film career into three phases. The first phase covers the five years period from 1978 to 1983, when he was struggling to establish himself. The second, corresponding with the release of *Khaidi* and coinciding with NTR's election as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, extends from 1983 to 1997 (1995 really, because no films of his were released in 1996), when he established himself as the most important star of the industry. Towards the end of this period, he began to face a number of challenges. The third phase extends from 1997, when Chiranjeevi re-established himself as the industry's biggest star, to 2008, when he announced the formation of the Praja Rajyam Party. In this chapter and the next, I examine the first two phases of Chiranjeevi's career, focusing mostly on films from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the long decade of the Telugu mass film. In Chapter 5, I discuss his post-1997 work.

Before I go any further, a few clarifications are in order. The mass film, as a journalistic term, has considerable judgmental value. To categorize a film as a mass film, is to condemn it. If, in any piece written for readers familiar with Telugu film criticism (written in either Telugu or English), I were to say that the 1980s is the decade of the mass film, the statement would be taken to mean that the eighties is a period in which Telugu cinema degenerated hopelessly. It implies terming the 1980s as the decade of vulgarity, tastelessness, obscenity, etc. As a journalistic category, the mass film existed before the 1980s: for example, some of NTR's more 'vulgar' works of the 1970s. However, it was in the 1980s,

that the category acquired prominence enough to assess and evaluate popular Telugu cinema. This development is certainly related to the industry's use of the term to describe its products, but it is also due to the *need* for a concept to render intelligible a widespread perception that there were disturbing changes not only in the domain of fans but also in the general film viewing population. These were apparently in response to something that was happening on the screen and that which caused them, which gradually became known as the mass film.

Specifically, the 'mass film' is thus a loose film industry and journalistic term that refers to films that presumably address or target the masses, and is degenerate for this reason. A newspaper article explains that 'mass' (in the mass film) connotes 'multitudes ... adulation ... worship' and goes on to list the formulaic elements associated with the genre: big budgets, stars in superhuman roles, lack of novelty of storyline, etc. (Kannababu 2005). Through the 1980s and 1990s, mass film was used in contradistinction to the 'class film,' which, in turn, presumably addressed middle class audiences.

The mass film's career, as an industrial term, implies that the referent has an existence outside journalistic discourse. Film star Krishna is reported to have described one of his films as a 'mass *chitram*' (mass film) that did average business (*Super Hit*, 27 June 2003).[1] Such references go to show that the term could be used to stand for big budget films featuring major stars. These films would purportedly be meant for the 'masses', characterized by their poverty, cultural inferiority, cheap tastes, low levels of intelligence, etc. Like children's films or women's fiction, its addressee would define the mass film as a distinct category. As for the masses themselves, a great deal of commercial Indian cinema would be produced for this elusive entity. The addressee assumes importance because the intended viewer and his/her tastes and concerns supposedly determine both form and content of films. But to the industry, the masses also connote the sum total of the film market, and consequently, the mass film is also used to describe films meant for the populace *in general*, not specific segments of the film market.

Mass Film as Genre

Genre, as has been noted by film scholars like M. Madhava Prasad (1998) and Lalitha Gopalan (2003) in the past, is a complicated category in the Indian context. Not that it is without problems in other contexts, but, here, we runin to a wider variety of complications. Historically, the social (any film set in the contemporary setting) emerged in

contradistinction to the mythological (stories of gods, sourced from the epics and the puranas). The latter was the dominant genre in both silent as well as early sound cinema, especially in Telugu, where it was made long after it became obscure in other industries. Prasad argues that the social, effectively *prevented* the development of individual genres. The industry was, in fact, interested in ensuring that the audience was not disaggregated (see Prasad 1998: 117–37). In Telugu cinema, the rise of the social was accompanied by the decline of other film forms (mythological, historical, and folklore film) and the process by which the social became the predominant industrial genre can be said to have been completed only in the 1970s.[2]

With the disappearance of the other 'genres', the social itself has become a redundant category. However, till very recent times (when films likened to Hollywood genres began to be made), the distinction between different kinds of social films appeared somewhat arbitrary. The Telugu film critic, K. Narasaiah, for example, listed the following trends in the formula films of the period under his consideration (mid-1980s): 'teenage films, sadist films, sex films, crime films, violent films ... superstitious films, invigorating films ... moralizing films, films encouraging immorality, cheap films ... folklore films, mythological films ... sloganeering films ... musical films' (1986: 176–7). Narasaiah's catalogue indicates that even in the 1980s, Telugu film critics did not have a notion of genre that went beyond industrial terms such as folklore film, mythological, and, of course, the social. The attempt to create sub-categories within the social falls apart because Narasaiah continues to work with easily identifiable older categories, while attempting to account for a number of emerging tendencies that were subsumed under the category of the social, but were, nevertheless, perceived to be internally differentiated. So, while it is clear what he means by folklore films, his category of the cheap films is indeed a puzzling one, and all the more so, because he also has 'sex films' and 'films encouraging immorality' as separate categories. Amusing as Narasaiah's exercise seems, the problem he encounters is not unique to Telugu cinema.

The Hindi film industry trade journal, *Trade Guide*, has for example this editorial contribution to make to the debate on genre in our context: '... the forthcoming week will witness the release of four films, all belonging to different genres *Hadh Kar Di Aapne* (comedy), *Gang* (action), *Halo* (children), and *Heerabai* (low-budget)' (8 April 2000: 20). Clearly, the industry's classification is not based on formal elements but on the economic logic that goes into the assembling of films—a logic that is evidently aimed at identifying audience categories for which a film is intended.

After the disappearance of the older companion genres of the social (mythological, etc.), we may now need to abandon the social itself as it is no longer a useful category, encompassing virtually the sum total of all the films made at present. The identification and discussion of the dominant as well as emerging tendencies since the 1980s is beyond this book's brief. I will only state that the mass film is the most crucial generic tendency within the social in the post-mythological era (late 1970s and early 1980s, to be more precise). There are obvious difficulties in calling the mass film a genre, since the category of the mass film includes a variety of tendencies that might themselves be termed genres: certain 'action' films, ruralist melodramas, the occasional western, and costume drama. Insofar as it is a supra-generic entity, rather than a genre in the usual sense of the term, the mass film is similar to the 'social'.

The mass film thus involves big budgets and major stars, and attempts to cater to the widest possible spectrum of the film market. I further suggest that for a variety of historical reasons, the mass film became identified with a set of themes, but, more importantly, with modes of spectatorial address and a political mandate.

The mass film needs to be seen as a genre also because:

> Genres do not consist solely of films. They consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. The systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render individual films, and the elements within them, intelligible and, therefore, explicable (Neale 2000: 31).

Paul Willemen's (2005: 227) point that the so-called expectations from a genre could well be a consequence of marketing strategies of the film industry is a necessary supplement to Neale's statement. Careful attention thus needs to be paid to claims made on behalf of a genre by the industry and the evidence provided by films themselves.

The mass film, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, had major stars playing roles of common people who were representatives of the masses. The heroes of the mass film engage in a battle against upper class/caste villains who are the enemies of the state and society. In the genre, class and caste dynamics are further fused with gender politics. Highly masculine lower class/caste men carry the class war into the interpersonal domain by either aligning with sexually aggressive lower

class women to fight a common rich enemy (for example, *Gangleader*), or tame the rich man's arrogant daughter and marry her to ensure the resolution of social and economic contradictions (for example, *Gharana Mogudu*). The mass film has close parallels with the vehicles of Rajnikant in Tamil, whose major hits were either dubbed into Telugu or remade. Rajnikant also featured in remakes of Telugu mass films on occasion. The Bachchan vehicle in Hindi is a precursor for the mass film, but it was also mediated by the Telugu remakes featuring NTR.[3]

Industrial Context

A key distinguishing feature of the mass film is the absolute centrality of the star to the narrative, as well as, to the business model of the film. While the mass film came into wide circulation as both a descriptive as well as abusive term in the mid to late 1980s, the formal and thematic features as well as the industrial logic can be seen as early as *Adavi Ramudu* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1977) and *Yama Gola* (T. Rama Rao 1977). These were films in which the NTR character is seen mobilizing the masses and also fighting on their behalf against oppressors. As early as the 1960s, there were signs that the Telugu film industry was relying on male stars for attracting investment into the production sector, which routinely made more flops than hits, and was therefore critically dependent on new investments to simply get on with the business of making films.[4] Around this time, it was being said that the *hero-dwayam* (star twosome), as NTR and ANR were being called by the film press, were so important for the industry that films were being made, essentially by using up call-sheets of these stars rather than on the basis of stories, etc. (Murthy 1963).

Telugu cinema's stars from the 1960s were able to indefinitely defer the crisis that logically ought to have resulted from the production sector's inability to recover costs. This they did by propping up a production model that relied on channelling surplus generated from various activities unrelated to the film industry into film production. NTR's pre-1983 vehicles, as well as films of other stars of this period, put in place a representational front end of this industrial model. This worked well till 1983. After TDP was voted to power, the industry had to address the issue of how the NTR model of stardom, or rather the kind of stardom of which NTR was the chief example, could be consolidated at a time when the star himself was no longer available.

Coinciding with NTR's election, we witness a remarkable development. *Representational techniques identified with established stars began to be deployed to shore up the fortunes of relative new comers and to create new stars.* The implications of such a deployment are not evident from a mechanistic understanding of genre, since, formally or thematically speaking, there is more continuity than change between the NTR vehicle and films made after his exit. In order to capture the complexity of the transformation of Telugu cinema after NTR's election and withdrawal from the industry (he continued to act in and direct films intermittently till his death), I would like to restrict the use of the term mass film for films made *after* the NTR vehicle—'after' in the chronological sense and also in terms of the borrowings. The mass film's critical difference with the NTR vehicle is that the latter is *centred on an absence.* In a sense, the name of this hole is NTR—he was, after all, not available—but the absence is textually manifest and worked out at the narrative level as well. As we shall see below, at the story level, it is the dead father and/or the absent/disintegrated family who are immediate stand-ins for what is missing in the hero's life. It is possible and even tempting to see the hero as a rebellious figure; however, it is useful to think of the characters played by a younger star as doing everything the old man NTR did on screen, and some *because the patriarch was not around anymore,* neither in the industry nor in the fiction.

The mass film is the cinematic equivalent of the NTR estate. Framed thus, it becomes possible to place in perspective the crucial function that the mass film served in the 1980s, and the frequent speculations on Chiranjeevi's political entry, resulting from the political messages his film roles purportedly sent out. Coincidentally, or perhaps not so surprisingly, two generations of actors, including the stars belonging to both the rival dynasties of Telugu film industry, have staked claims to the inheritance. The centrality of the masses for the mass film, both as addressee and diegetic presence, can also be seen as yet another obviously political sign of continuity.

Both the NTR vehicle and the mass film correspond with a period of rapid growth across all sectors of the Telugu film industry. Indeed, it is possible to suggest that this was the *form* around which the industry grew. Through the two decades from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, the number of productions grew rapidly as did the distribution network. Till the early 1990s, the exhibition sector (consisting of essentially single screen cinema halls or complexes housing more than one hall in larger towns and cities), too, grew impressively.[5]

NTR also made an important but indirect contribution to the mass film as an administrator, after he was elected to power in 1983,

by changing the entertainment tax regime. The new entertainment tax rule introduced in 1983, known in industry circles as the slab system, has been among the most important government interventions in the industry over the past few decades. Ordinance 31 of 1983 (later A.P. Entertainment Tax Act No. 24/84) classified theatres local area-wise (that is, according to whether they were situated in municipal corporations or cities, selection grade municipalities or large towns, etc.) and according to their amenities (that is, whether they were air-conditioned, air-cooled, or 'ordinary').

Across the country, a number of state governments instituted flat rates of taxation around this time and the most obvious reason for doing so was the widespread practice of under-reporting ticket sales by the exhibitor-distributor nexus in order to avoid paying entertainment tax. The practice of under reporting was widely prevalent and newspapers, too, occasionally drew attention to the sale of 'fake tickets' at cinema halls for which the exhibitor, of course, paid no tax (*Eenadu*, Vijayawada Edition, 2 March 1983: 6).

Under the new rules, tax was imposed on total seating capacity instead of on the number of tickets actually sold. An air-conditioned theatre in a city, at the highest tax bracket, was taxed at the rate of 25 per cent of the 'gross collection capacity' multiplied by 22 (per month). Temporary/touring cinemas, at the lowest end, were taxed at the rate of 13 per cent of the gross collection capacity multiplied by 7 in 1991 (*Andhra Pradesh Film Diary 1995*: 30). In the earlier system, tax was levied on the number of tickets actually sold at rates varying between 30 and 18 per cent. The tax rates underwent many modifications over the years and came down to 14 per cent at the highest and 8 per cent at the lowest levels in 1995 (*TV Chitra*, July 1995: 38). According to Gudipoodi Srihari, a three tier structure of taxation, which varied from 26 per cent for big budget films produced outside the state and 8 per cent for small budget films produced locally, was the most suitable for the film industry. The Congress government (1989–94) introduced this modification, and Srihari claims that under this tax structure, aided by subsidies that stood at Rs 3 lakh per film in this period, a number of low budget films were produced (Srihari 1995a: 14). For films which qualified for the lowest rate, the differential tax was actually in the form a tax subsidy to ensure that only films produced in Andhra Pradesh qualified. However, the tax subsidy was withdrawn after the government discovered that some producers were falsely declaring that their films were low budget productions (this in turn was decided on the basis of number of prints since it was impossible to audit actual production costs), to claim tax concessions. Upon returning to power in 1994, NTR reintroduced the 8 per cent slab (tax subsidy) for low budget films, but not the virtually penal rate of tax for big budget productions made in Madras. Producers, who had not yet shifted to Hyderabad, continuously lobbied with various governments to ensure that the tax and subsidies of the state did not adversely affect them (Srilata 1995: 38). Coincidentally, NTR's son Balakrishna was still based in Madras in 1995, as was Chiranjeevi, when policy changes were announced by NTR.

The slab system was rolled back due to lobbying by sections of the industry in 2005. What is significant for our purposes is that the government was 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 beyond a certain point for tax reasons alone. As maintenance costs increased, levels sustainability came down even further. The slab system, introduced to discipline the industry, propped up the mass film, whose wide appeal and star presence was thought to ensure full houses. I return to the consequences of the slab system for the industry in Chapter 5.

The Missing Patriarch: Thematic Concerns of the Mass Film

In the second phase of Chiranjeevi's career, spanning the period between *Khaidi* (1983) and *Hitler* (1997), the mass film emerged as the dominant genre of Telugu cinema. However, it also went through a period of crisis, spawning various experiments to revive its thematic concerns as well as economic logic. It is largely due to the emergence of the mass film that NTR's exit from the industry did not result in any drastic revamp or reorganization of the industry. Instead, new replacements were rapidly found to ensure the sustainability of the NTR model. The most obvious candidate was Chiranjeevi, who had acted in 50 films between 1978, when he entered the industry, and 1983. Although impressive, this number should not lead us to the assumption that he was already a major star in 1983. Chiranjeevi's contemporaries like Rajendra Prasad played the lead in dozens of low budget films in the 1980s and 1990s without breaking into the big league.

I will refer to Chiranjeevi's films before 1983 only in passing, because in these films, plentiful as they are, there was little consistency in his roles. Like most other inexpensive stars of that period, he was cast

in a variety of roles in films that drew on diverse sources and generic tendencies in the industry. These include the class film, and as well as action and suspense thrillers, neither of which was a distinct genre yet. Examples of the former include *Manavuri Pandavulu* (K. Bapu 1978, remake of the Kannada film *Paduvarahalli Pandavaru*, Puttanna Kanagal 1978), *Subhalekha* (K. Vishwanath 1982), and *Manchupallaki* (Vamsi 1982). *Yamakinkarudu* (Raj Bharath 1982, based on *Mad Max*, George Miller 1979) is an experiment in assembling a full-fledged action film. *Abhilasha* (A. Kodandarami Reddy 1983) was a suspense thriller based on a popular novel by Yandamuri Veerendranath.

In 1982, even as NTR was making his bid to capture political power, Chiranjeevi's *Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya* (Kodi Ramakrishna 1982) had a 25 week run (*Andhra Jyothi* 1982: iv). Within months of NTR's election, *Khaidi* (A. Kodandarami Reddy 1983) established Chiranjeevi as the most prominent star of his generation. This film was also a landmark mass film, demonstrating how techniques hitherto identified with established stars like NTR and Krishna could be also used to underscore the extraordinariness of a relatively minor actor—to create a star. I return to these techniques at some length in a different section below, but I will focus on the thematic concerns of the mass films of Chiranjeevi for the present.

Around 1983, an attempt was also made to launch NTR's son, Balakrishna, in the post election film featuring NTR himself, *Simham Navvindi* (Yoganand 1983). Balakrishna had acted intermittently in films, as a child star since the 1970s (for example, *Tatamma Kala*, NTR 1974). In the early 1980s, Balakrishna too began to act in films regularly and also played a role in his father's *Shrimadvirat Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra* (NTR 1984). *Mangammagari Manavadu* (Kodi Ramakrishna 1984), a ruralist melodrama revolving around an extended rich peasant family and its internal squabbles, is arguably his most important early 1980s film. The close association of Balakrishna with NTR, even on screen, reinforced the prevailing view that Chiranjeevi was a struggling and completely self-made man.[6]

It is incorrect to assume that there is a high degree of consistency in the themes of the mass film. Mass films are not always about poor people or their problems. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a case for a particular consistency in the careers of individual stars and for a recurring feature of the mass film: deep-rooted ambivalence to feudal authority. This ambivalence merits attention because it is crucial for defining the

kind of leader/authority figure that emerges not only from the screen roles of Chiranjeevi but also of the other stars of his generation.

At the very outset, Chiranjeevi's distinction was marked by the distance that he deliberately maintained from the roles played by NTR in the period just before the latter's election. However, a major development in which both NTR and Chiranjeevi were differentially implicated, was Telugu cinema's discovery of the feudal in the 1970s.

Most filmic representations of the countryside in the past, with the exception of a handful of films like *Raitu Bidda* (G. Ramabrahmam 1939), had scrupulously avoided any references to zamindari oppression. Simultaneously, from the commentaries on films produced between the 1930s and 1960s by Kodavatiganti (2000) and Sastry (1986), it is possible to suggest that Telugu cinema also avoided glorification of the feudal order. In films like *Shavukaru* (L.V. Prasad 1950) and *Palletooru* (T. Prakash Rao 1952) we notice that the countryside was peopled with rich and poor peasants, who belonged to the same kinship networks. Cross-cousin marriages were one of the forms of resolving class conflict. The ousting of feudal authorities and oppression from the village, is, of course, loaded with political significance, but is not of immediate relevance to our discussion. Instead, I would like to draw attention to the rather sudden discovery of the feudal authority figure—as a source of oppression as well as role model.

In the NTR films of the 1970s, especially *Raitu Bidda* (B.A. Subba Rao 1971, not to be confused with the 1939 film), we notice the surfacing of the feudal question, both as a problem of inheritance and also as a relationship that has to be replaced with modern forms of leadership and loyalty, respectively. By the late 1970s, there was a full-fledged obsession with the feudal in the Telugu film industry, manifesting in a steady output of films representing not only feudal oppression but also the recovery of other figures embodying inherited wealth or representing traditional authority as objects of nostalgia.

Like a number of struggling actors of the time, Chiranjeevi was closely identified with low-budget films. These included not just the thriller, the romance, and the class film, but also 'semi-realist' and 'semi-art' films,[7] centred on feudal oppression and peasant rebellion. A major source of influence on these films was New Indian Cinema, especially the work of Shyam Benegal, *Ankur* (1973) and *Nishant* (1975) in particular, which alerted the Telugu film industry to the cinematic uses of the feudal landlord. *Pranam Khareedu*, featuring Chiranjeevi as a poor peasant who leads a rebellion against the oppressive zamindar,

is a landmark film not only in his career, but also in the career of anti-feudal films inspired by New Indian Cinema. Within a couple of years this strand would result in a genre locally known as the red film or the communist film.[8]

The political context of Andhra Pradesh was, no doubt, a major reason for this turn towards a Left populism in Telugu cinema. The context was shaped by the public debates on feudalism, which were, in part, sparked off by the Srikakulam uprising (1967) and the Naxalite movement.[9] With the spread of Naxalism in the early 1970s to the plains of the Telangana region, the anti-feudal struggle and demands for land reform became central political questions. Sumanta Banerjee's observation underscores the importance of the feudal question for the movement:

> The main achievement of the Naxalbari movement was the ignition of a fire among the rural poor that has refused to die down till today. It continues to arouse them to protest and take up arms against their feudal oppressors, and even take on the Indian state whenever it sends its police to protect these feudal interests, whether in the villages of Bihar, or the tribal hamlets of Andhra Pradesh (2002: 2116).

The Congress government in the state not only responded with severe repression on the movement but also made a reluctant attempt at land reforms.[10] The Naxalite groups and their front organizations exposed the linkages between the landed elite (which held land *illegally*, for there was officially a ceiling on land ownership) and agencies of the state. Furthermore, the conditions of the rural poor as well as the severity of state repression were brought to light by the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) in its reports that were often highlighted in the mainstream press.[11] Moreover, due to the literary and cultural activities of organizations affiliated or sympathetic to Naxalite parties,[12] a popular critique of feudalism became available, which spread far beyond the areas where the Naxalites were actually mobilizing the poor.

Meanwhile, in NTR's films, the village landlord, who was also the maternal uncle of the hero, became the chief villain in *Yama Gola*. The hero is seen mobilizing the village youth against the landlord and his men, in the early part of the film. Starting with *Sardar Paparayudu* (Dasari Narayana Rao 1980) and coinciding with the most successful phase of NTR's acting career, a series of films were made thematizing the passing of an older (and glorious) order. The question these films' narrative raises is *what comes after the feudal*, which is now on the verge of extinction? The solution is presented in the form of the younger NTR, who is, in every sense, the true heir of the heroic patriarch or a replacement of an *inauthentic* patriarch.[13]

In all these films, the social is imaged as being centred on a lack or absence. The old order, these films suggest, has indeed disintegrated and the problem with the present is to find a replacement for the missing centre of authority. In the films themselves, this was going to be the NTR characters. The battle, if there was one, was not between ideological camps in the industry. Both approaches to the feudal question had a great deal in common and it was easy for stars as well as producers and technicians to move across the apparent political divide. Furthermore, NTR was not alone in the enterprise of presenting the feudal as an object of nostalgia. The younger Krishnam Raju played the lead role in *Bobbili Brahmanna* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1984) as the village chieftain who solves its disputes without the intervention of the modern state. The film was remade into Hindi as *Dharam Adhikari* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1986), with Dilip Kumar in the lead role. Krishnam Raju, known as the 'Rebel Star' could thus play a feudal patriarch with as much ease as a vigilante.

The political problem, as the Telugu cinema of the period would have it, is not one of good or bad feudal authorities, but the fact that neither was available for social organization. The hero had to, thus, either hasten the process of rendering the malevolent authority figure extinct (*Khaidi*, for example), or give the benevolent one a new lease of life (NTR's films). In either case, the question was one of filling the hole. The mass film thus swung between the arguably anti-feudal *Khaidi* to an undeniably anachronistic and revivalist one like *Pedarayudu* (Ravi Raja Pinisetty 1995).[14] These swings are quite consistent with its populism, which is not easily identified as left or rightwing. In the following pages, I will fill in the details of Chiranjeevi's career to illustrate the genre's handling of what was clearly an important political question, one thrown up by the Naxalite movement.

An additional feature that the mass film inherited from the work of NTR and Krishna, is the importance of the crowd in the diegesis. It is common for the mass film's action to be set in the midst of crowds (not just extras but also at times crowds of bystanders watching the shooting and staring or waving at the camera). The mass film is quite literally the film where the masses make a frequent appearance. The crowd, however, is not the only manifestation of the masses. In the

mass film, the star is the representative of the lower classes, one among the masses, as can be seen in *Khaidi, Gharana Mogudu, Mutha Mestri, Lorry Driver* (B. Gopal 1990, featuring Balakrishna), and *Gharana Bullodu* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1995, featuring Nagarjuna). While such roles, too, are a continuation of the careers of NTR and MGR in the films of the earlier generation of stars, the distinction of the protagonist had to be accounted for in terms of the plot, by presenting him as a member of a feudal family who will eventually reclaim his inheritance (or give it away). In the mass film on the other hand, there is often no attempt to present the hero as the lost son of the zamindar, who grows up as a commoner. The mass film's hero is a commoner, period. Typical of the genre's ambivalence, however, it is not difficult to find examples of the hero being the dispossessed son of a feudal lord.

Making of the Mass Film

In Chiranjeevi's *Khaidi*, however, it is the difference from NTR that comes across most sharply. Unlike NTR's later films, *Khaidi* does not attempt to resolve the crisis in feudalism by finding an heir for the feudal authority. Instead, the state's authority is depicted as being undermined by its linkages with a decadent feudal order. The hero in *Khaidi* severs the link between the landlord and the state by killing the landlord, in the process *legitimating* the state's authority. The state is thus freed from feudalism, so that it can get on with the business of governance. Suryam, the Chiranjeevi character in *Khaidi*, is a transitional authority figure, literally an embodiment of the anti-feudal struggle abandoned by the state, who surrenders (to the police) his agency after killing the landlord. In later mass films, the star-protagonist not only re-establishes the legitimacy of the state, but also becomes an alternative to the absent feudal authority.

Khaidi drew on previous Chiranjeevi starrers to reinforce some of their thematic concerns and their construction of the heroic rebel. R. Nandakumar points out: 'On the part of the spectator, it is not the individual roles in which the star is cast so much as one cumulative image that emerges from the totality of his various performances that comes in handy to be accepted' (1992: 44). The 'cumulative image' of Chiranjeevi that emerged in *Khaidi*, was a result of a selection (from his earlier films), or rather, a narrativization of his previous roles and 'life' to construct an authentic rebel-hero. I would like to add that, as early as 1979, details of Chiranjeevi's humble origin were well-known biographical 'facts'.[15]

In hindsight, *Pranam Khareedu*, Chiranjeevi's first film, proved to be very useful in this regard. The film was set in pre-independence India and was indebted to the politico-aesthetic space created by New Indian Cinema of the 1970s.[16] This film was shot in black and white, which at that time was limited to the cheapest films produced by the industry, and almost entirely on location at a village in West Godavari district. It depicts the atrocities of a landlord (Rao Gopal Rao) who kills Bhimudu (Chandramohan), the deaf-mute protagonist of the film, and his own wife (Jayasudha), suspecting an affair between the two of them. Chiranjeevi's role as Narsi, the rebellious former servant of the landlord, is small but significant. He returns from the city, where he migrates to in the early part of the film, and finds that the girl he wanted to marry (Reshmi) has been raped by the landlord's men. Later, he leads the villagers in rebellion and kills his former master to avenge the deaths of Bhimudu and the landlord's benevolent wife, who is herself from a poor family.

In *Chattaniki Kallu Levu* (1981), Chiranjeevi plays the role of Vijay, a vigilante who tracks down his father's murderers and kills them. His sister Durga (Lakshmi), a police officer, attempts to capture their father's killers, who hitherto had escaped punishment by producing fake alibis, and have them punished legally. Although she has the case reopened, she fails to gather evidence against them and fails to prevent Vijay from killing them. Furthermore, Vijay gets away with the triple murder as there is no proof of his involvement. He therefore proves that the law is blind (which is how the title translates into English), but, in doing so, ensures that society is rid of its most dreaded and powerful criminals.

In *Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya*, the hero, a government servant posted in a village, marries the haughty, college-educated daughter of a rich farmer. The narrative revolves around misunderstandings between the lead pair (Chiranjeevi and Madhavi), caused by the heroine's refusal to trust her husband. She is easily misled by the villain, a scheming neighbour (Gollapudi Maruthi Rao). The couple is reunited after the hero foils the villain's plan to rape the heroine. Interestingly, the hero's parents neither appear in the film, nor are they even mentioned. Like *Chattaniki Kallu Levu, Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya* has a hero who does not claim legitimacy by virtue of belonging to a feudal family. Instead, in both films the heroes are seen as inheriting nothing from earlier generations.

Discussing Amitabh Bachchan's films, Prasad remarks, '[T]he orphan is a figure of marginality, deprived of normal familial pleasures by the

intrusion of evil' (1998: 143). In the mass film, too, orphanhood is a common trope for representing marginality. The dead father/parents are also invoked to underscore the hero's distance from feudal authority.

Khaidi draws on the construction of the hero in *Chattaniki Kallu Levu* and *Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya*, where the heroes, being cut off from the feudal patriarch, do not inherit his authority, but become alternative sources of authority instead. The machismo of this new hero does not merely supplement his authority, but is, in fact, its chief source.

Before going any further, a disclaimer would be in order. It is not as if orphanhood is the essential or the only mode of constructing the kind of heroic figure that Chiranjeevi played on screen. In *Kodama Simham*, the hero has two sets of parents, the first being foster parents, with whom he has an interestingly playful relationship. It is then revealed that he is the descendent of a distinguished family that has been destroyed by the villains.

Returning to the early 1980s, *Khaidi's* departure from the two films of the period discussed above, lies in building on the marginality of the orphan/fatherless hero and producing him as a lower *caste* figure, in the sense that lower caste origins can be attributed to the hero by the audience, despite the absence of any mention of his caste status in the film itself. Post-independence popular Telugu cinema rarely contains explicit references to caste, although a number of caste-signifiers are deployed to suggest the caste of a character. In the careers of both Chiranjeevi and Rajnikant, who are strikingly dark complexioned in comparison to NTR and MGR, whom they succeeded, the surfacing of a certain kind of 'realism' ensured that the characters played by these stars could be read as standing in not only for a lower class hero, but a lower caste one as well. In *Khaidi*, a standard caste-marker—complexion—underscores the hero's subalternity. Around this time, filmmakers began to avoid coating the hero's face with pancake makeup, as was indiscriminately applied to all stars in the past, regardless of minor variations of skin complexion. For instance, the relatively fair skinned NTR and the darker ANR were both painted white even after they began acting in colour films. Fair complexion, enhanced by make-up, has been *the* signifier of the hero's upper caste status in popular cinema—there was no need for an explicit mention of his caste.

In *Khaidi*, the medium complexioned star not only remained so on screen, but in the opening sequence, the make-up enhanced the darkness

of his skin. Furthermore, in the absence of other signifiers marking him as upper caste, *Khaidi*'s lower class hero was also easily misrecognized as *lower caste*. It thus became possible for Chiranjeevi and some of the other stars of his generation to signify the lower caste status of their characters and enhance the *authenticity* of the subaltern figures they played. Our hero's subalternity was, no doubt, further authenticated by the stories of his humble origin, which often also included a caste angle: he was a Kapu in a Kamma dominated industry. Over the years he would become the very first non-Kamma to be counted among the biggest stars of the industry since the 1950s.

Another disclaimer: the absent/dead father does not always hint at the hero's lower caste origins in the films of Chiranjeevi. In some films like *Challenge* (1984) and *Gangleader*, despite his fatherlessness, the hero cannot be seen as a lower caste figure. Later, I shall briefly examine these films to illustrate how caste, fatherlessness, and the feudal are linked and also de-linked in the mass film.

Challenge, like *Abhilasha*, is based on a popular novel by the acclaimed 1980s novelist Yandamuri Veerendranath, who went on to direct Chiranjeevi in a film based on one of his novels (*Stuartpuram Police Station*). The Yandamuri connection was one of the means by which Chiranjeevi came to signify a generational shift in the industry.[17] More obvious markers of distinction were his dancing and fighting skills. The latter were further underscored by claims that he preferred to do his own stunts, especially in films inspired by action films made in different parts of the world. Notable among these are: *Yamakinkarudu* (*Mad Max*, George Miller 1979), *Hero* (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Steven Spielberg 1981), *Sivudu, Sivudu, Sivudu* (modelled on the Hong Kong martial arts film), and *Pasivadi Pranam* (*Witness*, Peter Weir 1985). Not to mention *Khaidi*, itself, which as we shall see, draws heavily on *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff 1982).

Challenge begins with Gandhi (Chiranjeevi) losing his mother due to his failure to bring her medicines on time. The opening sequence is a powerful indictment of the exploitative nature of the existing system: from the autorickshaw driver and pharmacist to the ward boy in the government hospital morgue, everyone demands additional payment (in the last case, a bribe) and tries to cash in on the emergency situation. After the death of his mother (his father is presumed to have died before the film begins), the poor, educated but unemployed Gandhi makes a bet with the millionaire Ram Mohan Rao (Rao Gopal Rao)

that he will earn Rs 50 lakh in five years. Rao, offended by the youth's arrogance, offers his daughter Harika (Vijayashanti) in marriage if he wins. Gandhi, with the help of Lakshmi (Suhasini), a poor university gold medallist whom he saves from drowning, initially sells ideas and helps clients establish businesses. He later starts an industry with the help of unemployed educated youth turned Naxalites, after reforming them. He then enters into a partnership with an unemployed engineer Vidyarthi (Rajendra Prasad) and starts a paper factory with a loan from his enemy, Ram Mohan Rao, outwitting his efforts to destroy his business ventures. With some help from Harika, who falls in love with him, he manages to earn the Rs 50 lakh. However, there is a misunderstanding between him and Lakshmi when the latter supports the workers in the course of a strike instigated by Ram Mohan Rao's men. In an attempt to avoid conceding defeat, Ram Mohan Rao attempts to flee the country. Gandhi catches up with him after a chase, but refuses to take his 'prize' (Harika) saying he only wanted to show that money was less important than human relations. Meanwhile, currency notes totalling 50 lakh spill all over a hillside and are picked up by the poor. Having proved that 'any intelligent person can earn money', Gandhi returns to Lakshmi and marries her.

In this film, education is deployed as a marker of upper caste status. Educated unemployed youth (gold medallists included in that category), who appear at regular intervals throughout the film are shown as standing examples of the failure of the welfare state. Gandhi and Lakshmi reject the state as an agency of employment/welfare and turn to capitalism. Interestingly, however, Gandhi's entry into the capitalist world is *preceded* by his condemnation of it as inhuman (which is why the bet is made in the first place). The temporary separation between Gandhi and Lakshmi is caused by the latter's apprehension that Gandhi has turned into an inhuman capitalist instead of exposing the system's shortcomings. Throughout the film, even as the narrative races ahead, there is a deep sense of loss: a suggestion that something is missing in the world of big money, which the challengers now enter. Gandhi and Lakshmi, at different points, name this absence as 'human relationships'. I would suggest that it is a sense of the social, an absence that is indexed in the film by the absence of the family—there is not a complete family, not even a nuclear family, in the film. Harika for instance, is motherless while Gandhi, Lakshmi, and Vidyarthi are orphans. The film, thus, nostalgically looks forward to the formation of the family with the marriage of Lakshmi and Gandhi. While the

feudal extended family is totally absent in the film, this absence acquires the status of an omniscient being as the hollowness of the capitalist system is repeatedly exposed. Although the narrative does not stage a return of the feudal, the fractured family—the sign of the lack of 'human relationships' in the film—becomes an indication of what is lost with the passing of an older order, whose sole vestige in the present is the arrogant Ram Mohan Rao. Moreover, state socialism/welfarism and capitalism are rejected as poor replacements for what is lost. In *Challenge*, the couple (Gandhi and Lakshmi) is burdened with the responsibility of the community's reorganization as various orphans are drawn towards the hero and heroine. *Challenge* doesn't quite fit the description of the mass film in terms of its techniques or the representation of the star-protagonist and the relationship it establishes between him and spectator. In thematic terms, however, there is a close fit between this film and the genre, which was not yet fully in place around this time.

Rather than tracking Chiranjeevi's career chronologically, for the moment I will stay with the question of the feudal, focusing primarily on films that revolve around it. I will have the occasion to return to some landmark 1980s films later in the chapter. In *Gangleader* (1991) and most other later Chiranjeevi mass films, the extended family's reorganization around the star-hero is seen as a replacement of the feudal society's organization around the patriarch. Raja Ram (Chiranjeevi), in *Gangleader*, is an educated unemployed youth who goes to jail for owning responsibility for an accident caused by some one else. He does this to raise money for his elder brother Raghava's (Sarat Kumar) education. He belongs to an extended lower middle-class family run by his eldest brother, Raghupati (Murali Mohan). His widowed paternal grandmother (Nirmala) becomes the titular head of the family in the absence of the parents, but it is really Raghupati's efforts that help the family survive. In many ways, this is a typical mass film family scene: a transitional figure of authority is on the verge of displacement. Soon, the villains kill Raghupati and Raghava marries a corrupt police official's daughter (Sumalata) and turns the rest of his family away, leaving the most irresponsible of the brothers, Raja Ram, in charge.

Before the bad times begin, there are some sequences that underscore the film's handling of the larger problem of the missing patriarch. A large framed photograph of Raja Ram's grandfather, bearing a striking resemblance to Raja Ram but in expensive clothing and turban, is worshipped by the grandmother. It is, of course, a photograph of

Chiranjeevi himself in the early twentieth century provincial big man getup. Quite obviously meant to indicate the family's feudal origins (and thereby the hero's upper caste status), the photograph is used, interestingly, for comic effect. On one occasion, Raja Ram dresses like his grandfather, removes the photograph from its frame and stands behind it to play a trick on his grandmother. Having become his grandfather, he makes the old woman promise that she would not harass Raja Ram because the youth is his (grandfather's) incarnation. Harassment here is understood to mean waking Raja Ram early in the morning and scolding him for returning home after midnight. On another occasion, the 'grandfather' makes passes at Kanya Kumari (Vijayashanti). At one level, however, the comic deployment of the dead ancestor also points at the uselessness of the feudal past. Raja Ram, after all, goes on to become a taxi driver and falls in love with the disowned daughter of the villain, Kanya Kumari, who is depicted as a female 'rowdy' in the early part of the film. However, these comic sequences also anticipate the evolution of Raja Ram into the *patriarch*, around whom the fractured extended family organizes itself. The threatened and incomplete extended family (Raghupati is killed by the villain while Raghava is misled by his upper class wife into disowning the rest of the family), itself, becomes a marker of the crisis in the film. The disintegration of the family, the film suggests, is at once a sign and an effect of the passing of the feudal. While there is no going back to the feudal, the absence of the feudal, itself, gestures towards that (imaginary) point of time when the social (the family/community) had not been fissured. The feudal, thus, invokes nostalgia in the film because it is irretrievably lost and has not yet been replaced by a credible alternative. At the level of story, the disintegration of the family and the gang of friends (which the film's title refers to), and the death of members of both the family and the gang, is a direct consequence of the malevolence of men in authority, who are presided over by a corrupt politician with whom Raghava's father-in-law is in league.

In the mass film, therefore, the 'crisis in feudalism' is imaged either as the *absence of the benevolent feudal patriarch* or as the *presence of the oppressive authority figure*, or, as a combination of both. Malevolent authority figures have to be destroyed because they do not represent *the* feudal (as it should be) but its distortion.[18]

What then is the problem that the genre attempts to resolve? The mass film represents the social as being centred on an absence (as seen above), an absence which is at once the sign of and cause for

the disintegration of the social (evident by the threat to the already fractured extended family/community). The state's delegitimization, coupled with the calling for urgent remedial measures, is tied up with the 'original' absence of the benevolent feudal which is seen as creating the conditions for its takeover by the gangster capitalist (*Gangleader, Gharana Mogudu*), malevolent landlord (*Khaidi, Khaidi No. 786*) or a combination of the gangster, politician, and capitalist (in most mass films including *Mutha Mestri* and even *Gangleader* we see an alliance of forces of evil including the gangster, politician, and corrupt government servant). This situation is also depicted as facilitating the emergence of the oppressive matriarch or vulgar (read independent) woman (*Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu* and *Gharana Mogudu* respectively), whose assertiveness or emergence into the public domain threatens the family (discussed in Chapter 4). The problem, then, is the degeneration of the public and private realms by the appropriation of authority or wealth by illegitimate claimants.

The rebel-hero, often represented as a criminal or a fugitive, is depicted not only as a manifestation of the crisis in authority (in that he is a product of the criminalization of the public domain and all-round degeneration) but also the agent of reform, precisely because he is also a major part of the problem of representing the subaltern *who is not in his place*.

The mass film, thus, interprets the social and political ferment of its time as a crisis in authority, be it that of the feudal order or the state itself. The figure of the rebel/rowdy is crucial to the resolution of the crisis. His war against evil feudal lords, corrupt police/government officials, and/or gangster-capitalist-politicians is a means of establishing order where there is only chaos. I will return to the political responsibility of the mass hero in the later chapters in some detail.

The genre's elaboration of politics is closely linked to how the star is presented in it. The discussion of thematic concerns throws light on the story level location of the star, but does not do justice to the fact that a film is, after all, a film and the stars work quite differently from characters in literature. Films produce spectators, even if these entities might be identified by concerned observers as voters or perverts, as the case might be. In my discussion of the political work of stars or even the cinema itself, a crucial focal point is the spectator produced by the film/genre in question. I will now turn my attention to the ways in which the star is deployed in the mass film to produce a certain kind of spectator. An argument about the mass film's politics cannot afford to

remain innocent of how the genre works to seduce and incite historically located viewers into willing spectators.

Mass Film's Star and Spectator

The mass film, in the early 1980s, used relatively minor stars and it was only in the late 1980s that the big star, big budget, and the mass film became a part of a single package. When it was finally assembled, the package was a pointer to the self-fulfilling prophecy that the mass film always was—in the absence of NTR, it created a generation of stars, presenting its male lead actors as if they were already stars, who were widely recognized by the viewers. With the simultaneous rise of Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna in the 1980s, the NTR model of stardom, which was an aesthetic one as much as it was an economic one, was developed further.

Even as I focus primarily on Chiranjeevi in this book, I would like to note that, in spite of the apparent differences between their individual styles, the themes of their films, and the violent conflicts between their fans, much was common between Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna. Both stars made similar contributions to the establishment of the mass film, which, among other things, was premised on the existence of whistling fans before the screen. Both worked with all the major directors associated with the mass film (Kodandarami Reddy, Kodi Ramakrishna, and B. Gopal, for example), even as these directors, too, grew in stature. Around these stars, the mass film, itself, emerged as a superstructural entity that was capable of facilitating innumerable experiments with not only other local but also Hollywood genres. The genres towards which the mass film gestured, include the action-adventure film, the western (*Kondaveeti Raja, Kodama Simham*), science fiction (Balakrishna's *Aditya 386*, Singeetham Srinivas Rao 1991, based on *Back to the Future*, Robert Zemeckis 1985), folklore film (*Raja Vikramarka, Bhairava Dweepam* featuring Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna, and based on *Coming to America*, John Landis 1988 and *Patala Bhairavi*, K.V. Reddy 1951, respectively), and the 'socio-fantasy' (industry term for the fusion of elements from the folklore or mythological film into a story in a contemporary setting, for example, *Jagadeka Veerudu Atiloka Sundari*).

Notwithstanding the borrowed plots and generic elements, the mass film (a) retained the formulaic elements and overarching melodramatic structure of popular Indian cinema, often revolving around the familiar narratives of revenge, familial crises, etc. and (b) unlike familiar local genres available thus far, it *consistently underscored the presence of the star within the diegesis* by the use of a number of techniques. I discuss, below, these techniques, which are at once the chief distinguishing feature of the mass film as much as markers of a historical phase in the life of popular cinema in the southern region. This phase witnessed the emergence of new stars in industries that were dominated and, indeed, formed around major stars of an earlier generation. While suggesting that there is a larger argument on the region's cinema waiting to be made, I will however restrict myself to the mass film itself and leave it to other researchers with the required competencies to make it.

The stars of the mass film do not make a quiet entry into the narrative. What allows us to conceive of the mass film, as a genre, is not merely the shared thematic or formal features of the films classified thus, but the manner in which the star (most often the male star) is deployed to produce a set of expectations, and, more importantly, *a particular kind of spectator*. I will mention in passing that, once the broader structure was in place, it became possible for female stars, especially the 'Lady Superstar' Vijayashanti, too, to be presented in a manner that was strikingly similar to that of their male counterparts.[19] The spectator position, constructed by the mass film, hinges on how the star is represented and what he does for the narrative.

The mass film, to begin with the beginning, has elaborate opening sequences. However, even before we arrive at the story proper, the credit sequence flags the presence of the star, whose name is accompanied by his honorific title ('Megastar Chiranjeevi in ...'). It is not unusual for the credits to have freeze frames of the star or have the star looking directly into the camera and waving, winking, or smiling. So the entry of the character, played by the star into the narrative, is preceded by the announcement of the presence of the star in the film, no doubt as its chief attraction. The extent to which the mass film can go to making a spectacle of the credits, can be seen in most vehicles of major stars produced in the past decade. By far the most striking embellishment of the credit sequence, in order to underscore the stature of the star, is to be seen in *Rayalaseema Ramanna Chaudhury* (Suresh Krissna 2000). The film happens to be the 500th film of its star Mohan Babu, who like Chiranjeevi began his career in supporting/'negative' roles in low budget films. He was also a TDP Rajya Sabha MP for a term. Here, the opening credits become the occasion for the telling of the story of the star's rise. The sequence strings together clips from Mohan Babu's landmark films. When the count reaches 500, or arrives at this film, the

title appears along with two images of the star, in one of which he in the getup of Rayalaseema Ramanna Chaudhury, the character he plays in this film. Having thus underscored the importance of the star that plays the character, the sequence then presents another dimension of the star. We see a farmer ploughing land. The camera zooms in on the plough and a clod of mud is transformed into a flash of light, which then morphs into the star. Even as the shapeless mass grows more recognizable, the field now becomes the globe. The star, when he is finally recognizable, is towering over the globe itself. He is literally the son of the soil (presumably of the Rayalaseema region, where the film is set, but also a region to which the star has often traced his origins), who has achieved global recognition. The figure who overshadows the globe is named as *Nataprapoorna* (one who has achieved mastery in acting) and Collection King (reference to high box-office collections of his films), his two honorific titles as he faces the camera and showers petals towards it. The petals then return from below the camera in the form of hearts representing the love of the viewers for him. The hearts form the words 'Dr. Mohan Babu'. Then the rest of the credits appear against the backdrop of stock scenes of rural life.

Moving on to the introduction of the star-protagonist into the narrative, here, too, elaborate introductions of the star have been a feature of the vehicles of most Telugu and Tamil stars since the 1980s. As such, the practice can be traced back to the films of NTR and MGR from the late 1960s. However, *Khaidi* set a new trend of making the entry of the star-protagonist a distinct filmic component, which like the song, comedy track, or the fight sequence, is relatively autonomous from the rest of the film.[20] As the years went by, each arrival of the star-protagonist at the scene of action, in the course of a single film, began to be accompanied by a signature tune. Further, heroines, comedians,

FIGS 29, 30: Credits of *Gharana Mogudu* with still images of Chiranjeevi from the film.

and villains, too, began to have their own special introductions, as the mass film's logic extended beyond the individual male protagonist to a whole package of stars offered in a single film, before and behind the camera.

Khaidi is an important film not only in Chiranjeevi's career, but also in the history of the mass film. In *Khaidi*, Chiranjeevi is cast as Suryam, the city educated son of a poor peasant who falls in love with the local landlord, Veerabhadraiah's (Rao Gopal Rao) daughter—his classmate in college. Trouble begins when the landlord comes to know about the love affair. Failing to coerce the hero's father into breaking the affair, the landlord kills the old man. His crony, the village munsif, kills Suryam's sister and Suryam is accused of the crime. Suryam is tortured by Veerabhadraiah for his 'crime' but escapes before the police arrive to arrest him. Most of the film revolves around Suryam's attempt to escape from the police and avenge the murders of his father, sister, and, later, Doctor Sujata (Sumalata) who shelters and helps him. After a series of arrests and escapes, he kills the villains and surrenders to the police.

Making some obvious references to *First Blood*, from which it draws heavily for its entire opening sequence and some other scenes as well, *Khaidi* has the vigilante seeking revenge upon an oppressive feudal landlord who is in alliance with government officials as well as urban criminals. This film makes overt gestures to the 1970s anti-feudal films, in which Chiranjeevi began his career. The film begins in *medias res*, very much like *First Blood* with the hero roaming the countryside, but unlike the Hollywood film, he is doing so with murderous intent. He is arrested by a police inspector (Ranganath) who suspects him to be the man attempting to murder a local landlord (Rao Gopal Rao). As in *First Blood*, the Chiranjeevi character does not reply to the questions of the police and refuses to let them fingerprint him. In a fascinating divergence from one of the details of the police station incident in the original, the sequence in *Khaidi* deploys a technique that was familiar enough in popular cinema by this time, but was to acquire critical importance in the mass film. I will call this technique the *biographical reference*.

During the course of the interrogation in *Khaidi*, a policeman reaches for an amulet hanging from Suryam's neck. Suryam holds the hand of the policeman, drawing a sharp rebuke from the officer conducting the interrogation. Suryam lets go of the constable's hand and the latter snatches the amulet and hands it over to the officer. The officer looks

at it and notes, 'So you are a devotee of Anjaneya *swamy*'. Eliciting no response, he proceeds with the interrogation as if disappointed that the amulet has failed to give him a vital clue. In the Hollywood film, the police learn the name of the character at this point. The innocuous comment by the police officer draws attention to the widely known biographical detail of Chiranjeevi's devotion to Lord Anjaneya. One of the very first personal details that became available about Chiranjeevi, in the late 1970s, when the film press noticed him, was his devotion to Anjaneya, which the star claimed even determined the choice of his screen name. The point, of course, is not what proportion of the audience could have known this detail about the star. Even as the film remains faithful to the original, in the process of revealing a detail about the character, it constructs a spectator who is presumed to be aware of the distinction of the character: he is in fact a star. In this film and the others that followed, the biographical reference is a gesture beyond the fictional universe. I will address the why question presently, after the elaboration of the forms the reference takes.

In a typical mass film, there are frequent references to the star's name/surname, honorific titles such as Megastar (Chiranjeevi), Yuvasamrat (Nagarjuna), Yuvaratna (Balakrishna), etc. Diminutives of the star's name, such as Chiru and Balayya too are heard in the course of the film, especially during song sequences. In a song in *S.P. Parasuram*, the character he plays is referred to as 'Chiru' by the heroine. *Kodama Simham* has a song in which the refrain is 'Star, Star, Megastar'. In *Alluda Majaka*, Toyota (Chiranjeevi) is introduced by his sidekick Mandela (A.V.S. Subramaniam), as 'Megastar' Toyota. In any number of his films including *Khaidi* and *Jagadeka Veerudu Atiloka Sundari*, the characters he plays are devotees of Anjaneya, the star's favourite god. In *Gangleader* and *Mutha Mestri*, the chief protagonists have the surname Konidela, the same as the star's. But this is not all. In *Mutha Mestri*, Chiranjeevi emerges from a hoarding of one of his own earlier films to dance briefly with the 'vamp' ('Silk' Smita), who is dancing with the Chiranjeevi character of this film (to the song *Ee petaku nene mestri*). In *Hero*, the film's heroine (Radhika) and her mother (Nirmala) travel in a rickshaw decorated with Chiranjeevi film posters. In one sequence, there is a poster of an older Chiranjeevi film in which both the hero and heroine of this film feature. *Big Boss* has a song, shot partly in the midst of a gathering of his fans, which features Chiranjeevi playing himself. Indeed, this film features the comedian Ali as a Chiranjeevi fan who 'mistakes' the protagonist for the star!

Khaidi and the mass films that followed in its wake introduced the star as someone who is offered as the object of spectatorial investment, an agent for the future fulfilment of expectations and provider of pleasure. In *Khaidi* the biographical reference is a cue for the dramatic events that will follow. In the mass films that came later, such direct links between the naming the star and important turns in the narrative, are not made. Returning to *Khaidi*, soon after the comment about the hero being an Anjaneya devotee, he is taken to the lock-up where the barber's approach triggers off the events that set the story rolling. Seeing the barber, Suryam tries to make a dash for the door only to be stopped by a police officer who yanks him by the neck. There is now a cut to Suryam tied to a cart and lifted violently from the ground. We realize this is a flashback fragment when we are returned to the police station. In the next few seconds, shots of the action in the police station, which now centre on the approach of the barber wielding a razor to shave Suryam, are parallel edited with shots of Veerabhadraiah (we do not know his name yet) approaching the hero tied to a cart and slashing his chest with a razor. This scene belongs to a longer flashback that unfolds later in the film. But there is a fair degree of obviousness about the fragment, for there is an immediate spectatorial recognition of the famous screen villain, Rao Gopal Rao, who plays the landlord. The striking similarity between the ill treatment of the hero in the police station and in the village, points to the similarity between the police and the landlord. When the full flashback unfolds, it turns out that the police are actually in active collaboration with the landlord. The hero screams when Veerabhadraiah's razor slashes him—the barber is yet to touch him—and attacks the police officer holding him by the neck. A thrilling fight, no doubt much anticipated, follows immediately. Notably, the build up to the fight is remarkably slow and deliberate. At different points of time during the investigation, Suryam reacts as if he will fight the police, but the inevitable fight is deferred till the flashback fragment is shown.

In this film, with the insertion of the biographical reference, the fulfilment of spectatorial expectation becomes critically hinged on the hero, whose distinction has been underscored by a reference to his star status. The deferred fulfilment ensures that the narrative unfolds according to spectatorial expectation, indeed, as if structured by it. When the narrative logic is in place, the story can begin. The narrative logic, the mass film repeatedly demonstrates, requires the construction of a spectator who *wills* things to happen and trusts the star to make

them happen. In *Khaidi*, this point is reached with the fight sequence. And at this point in the film, the opening credits roll out. *Viewers* still do not know the name of the character played by the star. The spectator—the entity that knows how to read and what to make of the film—is in place. It is this entity that the opening sequence invites the real viewer to become for the duration of the film.

Over the years the sequences establishing the star-protagonist's presence in the film became regular items, elaborate and autonomous from the rest of the film (like the credit sequence itself of *Rayalaseema Ramanna Chaudhury*). These do not necessarily occur in the very beginning of the film and although they have little to do with the story, they offer a variety of thrills. Chiranjeevi's *Ghanara Mogudu*, for example, introduces the hero about six minutes into the film, in a segment that includes a fight and the most popular song in the film, *Bangaru kodipetta*. This sequence is independent from the rest of the film and none of the characters in this segment, other than the hero, reappear later. In this film, the hero *enters the story space*, which is established early in the film as being dominated by the industrialist-heroine, only in the next sequence, when he meets his ailing mother who is in another city where the rest of the film is set.

Even when there was a direct relationship with the story, the opening/introductory sequences incorporate an elaborately staged *play with star recognition*. In *State Rowdy* (B. Gopal 1989), a group of thugs on the lookout for Kali (Chiranjeevi), attack a slum demanding that they be provided with information about his whereabouts. As the thugs go about their business of terrorizing the slum-dwellers, the star is introduced—literally in parts—from his booted feet upwards. The shots of the star's body are interspersed with the chaos caused by the thugs and the culmination of this waiting game is reached with a hand reaching out just in time to prevent the film's heroine from falling on a trident at a roadside shrine. 'Who are you?' demands the leader of the thugs. 'Kalicharan' echoes on the soundtrack as the hand picks up vermilion from the shrine and applies it on the forehead. Only now do we see the face: it is, of course, Chiranjeevi's. In *Alluda Majaka*, too, Chiranjeevi is presented in a series of tilt up shots in close-up, starting with his feet. These shots are interspersed with shots of crowds of eager diegetic viewers jostling to look at him.

The biographical reference to the star's extra-textual existence, is not unique to either to the mass film or to Telugu cinema. The biographical reference is a technique with considerable history in Telugu cinema.

It is traceable to *Patala Bhairavi* (K.V. Reddy 1951) and includes a variety of ways in which the star's extra-diegetic existence as a 'real person' is gestured towards, in the course of the film. In *Patala Bhairavi*, the protagonist's name (Thota Ramudu/Ramudu, played by NTR) is a diminutive of Rama Rao. References to other films by the same star, too, are common in Telugu films before the 1980s. In *Iddaru Mitrulu* (Adurthi Subba Rao 1961), featuring Akkineni Nageswara Rao, there is a mention of *Keelugurram* (Raja of Mirzapur 1949), which was an early hit of the star. In this film, the 'keelugurram' or mechanical horse in question, is a car that the Nageswara Rao character, a mechanic, is attempting to repair. Paidipaala draws our attention to a remarkable song in the NTR starrer *Manushulanta Okkate* (Dasari Narayana Rao 1976), whose words consist entirely of the titles of previous NTR starrers (Paidipaala 1992: 76). By the mid 1970s, dozens of films featuring NTR, starting with *Aggiramudu* (S.M. Sriramulu Naidu 1954), had 'Ramu', 'Ramudu', or 'Rama' in the title.[21]

What does the biographical reference do? Richard Dyer argues that the star image is 'authenticated as something more—truer, more real—than an image' by referring back to his/her existence in the 'real world' (1991: 135). According to Dyer, the mobilization of 'facts' about the star needs to be read as being part of the attempt at the authentication of the star image as a whole. He adds: '[T]he authentication afforded by the ambivalent star-as-image: star-as-real-person nexus resembles nothing so much as a hall of mirrors' (p. 136). Biographical reference is thus one of the ways by which authentication of the star image takes place at the fiction end of stardom.

In the Indian context, Pandian (1992) shows quite persuasively how the authentic image of MGR was created by mobilizing both films and 'biography', with the biography too being fabricated from half-truths and blatant lies about the star's greatness. The point I am trying to make is not about the 'falseness' of the 'authentic' star. After the work by Dyer (1991 and 1994) and Pandian (1992), it is not difficult to show up the falseness of the image which claims authenticity.

Hardgrave Jr. says: 'The [MGR] films are filled with references which blur the role and the actor into one' (1973: 299). That the mass film, like the MGR vehicle, is filled with references to the star-as-real-person, is undeniable. But do these references blur the difference between the role and the actor? While all films work with the double presence of the star (as character and person), I would like to ask why, and to what effect, the 'real' star is a constant referent in the mass film.

The answer is certainly *not* that viewers are fooled into believing that the star is an epitome of goodness in his 'real' life. It is incorrect to make an abrupt transition between the star's construction in the fiction and its effects in the real world. On the contrary, the mass film seems to suggest that it is necessary to make a distinction between the fiction and the 'real' star that exists beyond it.

If the reference to the star's 'real' life is *ubiquitous* practice in cinemas of the world, a question we can ask is what use it is put to in different genres and industries. The big new development in the mass film is in finding *narrative* uses for star recognition. Spectatorial knowledge of the star is interwoven with *history*, not only of the star's roles but also the past of the character played by him.

The mass film's hero is often an orphan but always has a past, which will be recalled later in the film. Like the star himself, the character, too, has a prior history that the spectator is either expected to know, or will be given privileged access that is denied to the characters in the film. In the flashback fragment in *Khaidi*, the spectator alone has access to the star-protagonist's mind in the fiction and *sees* the character's past in an instant. This privileged access to the protagonist finds a resonance often enough in the mass film, when the protagonist, inexplicably enough, knows about something because the *spectator* has seen it. For example, in *Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu* (1989) and *Alluda Majaka*, the hero foils the plans of his adversaries exhibiting his awareness of these plans, although the narrative does not indicate that he has either overheard the plotters or been informed by another character. Kalyan/Chiranjeevi, in *Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu*, warns his mother-in-law not to provoke him by plotting against him. He then looks into the camera and says, 'You know who I am'. Yes, of course, he is Chiranjeevi and therefore no villain can outwit him, but he is also that entity which sees for and sees because of the spectator.

The degree of intertextual detail in the mass film, especially with reference to the star's biography and oeuvre, allows us to conceive of cinephilia in terms other than those proposed by Lalitha Gopalan. In Gopalan's discussion of the concept, it comes across primarily as *resistance* and contestation that is to be located in the reader's response to the cinema. She makes the interesting but somewhat surprising assertion that 'reading details is very much a feminist project' (2003: 14), and goes on to summarize her analysis of earlier scholars' work on cinephilia thus: 'These critical positions suggest in a roundabout way that cinephiliac readings—the fetishisation of details—open film texts to other scenes of contestations in public life towards which master theoretical tools broadly gesture in their proclamations of progressive and regressive meanings of films'. Her own work, she adds, is a 'reading of contemporary Indian popular films, where one of the pleasures of working on contemporary Indian cinema surfaces when films read our desires back to us, both regressive and Utopian' (p. 15).

The mass film, like a great deal of popular Indian cinema, is premised on certain reading competencies of its viewers. When an 'incompetent' reader comes across a mass film, it cannot but fall apart. Although I have made arguments on behalf of resisting viewers and counter-hegemonic readings in the past (Srinivas 1997), over the years I have grown suspicious of studies of the popular that are anxious to recover women and other subaltern groups as subjects of a progressive politics (one that is, alas, lost in the domain of politics proper). I would like to suggest that fandom and its objects of obsession do not become any less interesting or politically significant if we stopped treating them as counter-hegemonic.

By way of retrieving cinephilia from simplistic notions of resistance, I would like to show in Chapter 5 how a film form associated with a specific set of spectatorial pleasures might, in fact, have become an obstacle for the transition of the Telugu film industry into a culture industry engaged in the manufacture of cultural commodities which, in turn, generate profits. Towards this end, I suggest that the resistance does not lie at the level of oppositional readings of textually inscribed signs. The web of intertextual detail is meant to be noticed, and not discovered only during acts of rebellion. My ability to catch these details is not an indication of my inclination to offer resistance to the mass film, but a sign that 'I' approximate the spectator which the genre posits, 'getting the point' as 'I' am meant to. What kind of an entity, then, is the spectator of the mass film, who is offered the incitements to cinephilia? From the researcher's point of view, what comes after the narratives of viewer insurrection?

The actions of the star in the mass film, whose status as a star cannot be missed, is presented as if it is a direct consequence of the will of the spectator. While the presence of the whistling fan in the cinema hall is an important detail to keep in mind during the discussion of the mass film, it is not as if the film is speaking to an empirical entity that is already fully formed. The structuring of the introductory sequence, in general, and the moment of arrival of the star, in particular, allows us to see that the film constructs a spectator who *knows* (about the star but

also what to expect), *wills* (the action), and also *trusts* (the narrative to provide pleasure by fulfilling expectations). I will call this abstraction or construct of the mass film the *fan-spectator*. As Willemen (1994: 63) would have it, this is the fan inscribed in the film, not history. It is what the mass film invites its actual viewers to become.

There is a correspondence, an analogy, between the fan-spectator and the actual fans that gather before the screen to watch films. However, it is important not to confuse one for the other. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the critical gap that exists, and, at times, come to the foreground—between the fan-spectator and sections of a film's audiences. It is not my intention to claim that fans' associations are a consequence of the influence of films on sections of the viewers, who have been transformed into zombies modelled on the fan-spectator. However, fan activity cannot be understood except as a response to a certain kind of cinema. It cannot be explained away as a natural consequence or side effect of Dravidian politics (or some pathology endemic to the region due to modes of worship, etc.). The mass film has a dynamic relationship with fan activity in that it is, at once, a response and an incitement to the fan response. The genre's incitement to fandom is 'universal' and targeted at the audience at large, while only a small section of this audience are a part of the sociological phenomenon of fans' associations.

The Moment of Irrationality

The fan-spectator of the mass film is a privileged entity. She has an intimate relationship with the star who performs for her benefit and according to her wishes. The privileging of the spectator returns us to the notion of entitlement, discussed in the previous chapter. Nowhere is this more strikingly evident than during what I will call the *moment of irrationality* in the mass film. Some explanation and disclaimers are in order at this point. The moment of irrationality is quite simply that moment in the film when the magical occurs: dying heroes rise again (*Bhadrachalam* N. Shankar 2001), stones become goddesses (*Ammoru* Kodi Ramakrishna 1995), and saviours are released from vows that prohibit them for fighting (*Big Boss*).[22] The occurrence of such moments is neither limited to the mass film, Telugu cinema, or even other Indian cinemas. I have, elsewhere, drawn attention to the moment of irrationality in *Kung Fu Hustle* (Stephen Chow 2004), a Hong Kong film positioned for the international market (Srinivas 2005). So there can be no question of claiming that this mass film highlight is evidence of the genre's distinction/uniqueness.

As far as the mass film, itself, is concerned, the techniques that go into the production of the moment of irrationality were borrowed from films of other genres and industries, where they were often deployed to flag the occurrence of a supernatural or magical event in the course of the film. In Telugu cinema, the devotional film offers some of the most developed instances of the moment of irrationality in the 1990s. An example which included all the cinematic techniques I draw attention to below, is to be found in the climax of *Sri Srisaila Bhrambhika Kataksham* (B. Vittalacharya 1991).[23] I will also suggest that the prominence of the image of a god in the mass film's moments of irrationality (*Big Boss*, *Bhadrachalam*, to take two examples), is evidence of the source of the borrowing.

Regardless of the genre or industry of its occurrence, the moment of irrationality has some similarities, which will become clear even as I discuss my examples below. However, I would like to confine the discussion to the mass film for obvious reasons of focus. A key issue that surfaces in such moments, is one of verisimilitude. I use verisimilitude, here, in Steve Neale's (2000) sense of the term, to refer to what might be possible or plausible within the fictional universe of a genre. According to Neale, '"Verisimilitude" means "probable", "plausible" or "likely". In addition, it entails notions of propriety, of what is appropriate and *therefore* probable (or probable and therefore appropriate) ... Regimes of verisimilitude vary from genre to genre' (2000: 32, original emphasis).

Unlike the occurrences of the magical in folklore or mythological genres, where they are to be found throughout the film, in the mass film, the magical signals a clear deviation from one register of plausibility to another, within the same film. So, it is not as if incredible events occur all the time in the mass film, as they might in the folklore film. These are also moments of spectatorial anxiety, being crucial turning points in the fiction, when the gradual or dramatic surfacing of the possibility of the story being run aground, threatens the comfortable and pleasurable position of the spectator. Anything can happen during the moment of irrationality, provided there is a *willing* spectator, one who (a) is willing to accept the overall frame of plausibility offered by the film in which such a shift of register is acceptable and (b) can actually make the magical happen by actively willing it. The spectacular occurs because it is willed by the spectator and when the narrative explicitly acknowledges the entitlement of the spectator to the fulfilment of her expectations. This acknowledgement is flagged by a disruption in the flow of the narrative that is manifest visually

in the exponential increase in cuts, deliberately unsteady camera, and unusual camera angles.

Khaidi's opening sequence is once again relevant to our discussion. The point just before the fight breaks out, is arguably among the earliest instances of the occurrence of the moment of irrationality, outside the devotional film, in Telugu cinema. As stated above, the building up of the expectation of a fight, culminates in the scene when the barber approaches Suryam with the razor. The morphology of the last part of the sequence, that precedes the outbreak of the fight, is relevant to my discussion. In this sequence, when shots of the barber's approach and the torture in the village are woven together, through the use of editing techniques, a deliberate sense of the disruption is created, as if in preparation for the actual disruption that will follow soon enough. Abrupt changes of point of view and location create the sense of an omniscient spectator who is suddenly everywhere: past and present, village and jail, looking at the hero, looking at the barber, and at the landlord, etc. The sense of momentary disorientation ends with the spectator gaining complete control of the fictional universe and being able to force the narrative towards the hero's (anticipated) escape from captivity. The fight sequence, spectacular by the standards of the time, has the hero exploding in anger and sending men, furniture, and doors flying in all directions. All this violence is immensely pleasurable, precisely because it matches up to the scale of the expectation, which grows in direct proportion to the delay in its fulfilment.

To conclude this section on the thematic and formal concerns of the mass film, the genre is the Telugu film industry's response to the exit of its most important star (NTR). It evolved to produce and showcase other stars as objects of spectatorial pleasure. The mass film gradually emerged as the most significant model for assembling the generic star vehicle and spawned minor genres like the Naxalite film, which were founded on a very different economic model.[24]

A key question that the mass film raises, and one that is not limited to the study of Telugu cinema, is one of the cinema's linkages with politics. The question, itself, is foregrounded in the history of Telugu cinema for two reasons: first, because the mass film is the genre that came after NTR's migration to politics, and second, it produced Chiranjeevi, who, too, followed NTR to make a career in politics. What is interesting about Chiranjeevi's career is that, from around 1993, a good 15 years before he actually made public his desire to contest elections, he was widely expected to follow NTR's trajectory and evidence was

constantly found (manufactured) to 'prove' that this was immanent. As we shall see in the later chapters, 'evidence' often came in the form of political messages that were presumably inserted into his films. In 2008, Chiranjeevi proved that the speculations and rumours were after all justified. The danger of this degree of obviousness, of the apparent political worth of a film genre for a career in politics of its most important star, is that it renders analysis redundant. The fact of the crossover cannot possibly be an explanation. Chiranjeevi's crossover, thus, sharply poses the question of what the connection between cinema and politics might be and challenges us to move beyond the framework of influence and effects of the screen image. The question before me is not what messages in his films make Chiranjeevi's viewers his voters. My question is what kind of a film form produces a star who is destined to retire as a politician? And this form—with its stars and fans—would emerge as the single largest obstacle to the Bollywoodization of Telugu cinema.

Cinematic Populism: *Big Boss* and the Work of the Mass Film

In this section I, would like to argue that Telugu commercial cinema is populist in a foundational way. There are parallels between my attempt to make a case for cinematic populism and Madhava Prasad's argument on 'cine-politics' (1999). Prasad uses cine-politics not only to refer to the historically specific phenomenon of the south Indian star-politician but also to frame his question of what is the specific contribution made by the cinema to the phenomenon. Prasad argues:

> 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).

To sharply pose my problem, I will ignore the mass film's more obvious links with politics/politicians: it's past association with NTR and the role it has played in Chiranjeevi's career. I will also, for the moment,

leave out of consideration the genre's thematic concerns to make an argument about the 'purely cinematic' foundations of its populism.

Regardless of, or indeed in spite of, the seemingly obvious gestures of Telugu cinema towards politics, it is not at the level of thematic concerns of films alone, that the argument on the cinema's political work can be made. Thematic concerns and story level gestures towards one or another political ideology, are, after all, common to a number of cultural forms. Exclusive focus on this level of analysis tends to ignore cinema's specificity. I also do not see much point in discussing films only to reiterate what we always knew about inequality and oppression in our society. The analytical usefulness of the mass film lies in its ability to open up populism of popular culture as the object of critical examination.

Big Boss is the film I focus on to try and make a larger argument on the mass film in this section. The argument hinges on the film's construction of the willing spectator and the peculiar ability of this entity to determine the course of the narrative.

Big Boss was something of a commercial disaster and fans I met in the mid-1990s, were, at times, critical of it. I discovered the film, in a manner of speaking, in an interesting setting. On 1 May 2007, I travelled with a group of Hyderabad based fans of Chiranjeevi to Ongole town, to be a part of the 100-day celebrations of *Hitler*. The event was a special occasion for fans because *Hitler* was Chiranjeevi's comeback film. The star had had a string of box office failures from 1993, with *Alluda Majaka* (1995) proving to be the sole hit. Worse still, due to a series of coincidences, the star had no new releases in 1996. All this led to declarations by 'rivals' in fan circles that Chiranjeevi was 'finished'. With the success of *Hitler*, the Chiranjeevi fan was back in business. As it turned out, Ongole, the district headquarters of Prakasam, was saturated with sights and sounds related to Chiranjeevi films. His fans were quite literally all over the place, having descended by the thousands. Local cinemas were screening re-runs of *Alluda Majaka* and the walls were plastered with posters, not only of this film but also those produced by fans. Through most of the day, vehicles blaring music from his films roamed the town, along with others which had groups of Chiranjeevi fans shouting slogans in favour of the star. We reached Ongole early in the morning and checked into a small hotel, where a room had already been booked for the group. Through the morning and early afternoon, we made unsuccessful attempts at sighting the stars, who were to arrive at a posh hotel nearby. The afternoon heat drove us indoors and

someone switched on the black and white television in the room. While he was flipping channels out of sheer boredom, standing right before the set because there was no remote control, he discovered that the local cable network was showing *Big Boss*. There was no more channel surfing that afternoon. The choice of the film by the cable operator was, no doubt, determined by the fact that this, among the few recent films of Chiranjeevi, had had an official release in the video format. The crawler at the bottom of the screen announced that the 100-day celebrations of *Hitler* would be telecast live. I made a quick note of the announcement in my mind—I did not know such things happened.

In January 1995, I spent a day on the sets of *Big Boss*, in Madras, and was, thus, curious to watch it when the film would be released later that year. I had watched the film twice during its theatrical release in 1995, and was disappointed each time. But, in Ongole, while waiting for the event commemorating the return of Chiranjeevi, it seemed to be the most appropriate film to watch. After all, it has Ali playing a Chiranjeevi fan. Soon, I was surprised by our collective enjoyment of the film, in particular my own, since I was not even a fan who had something to celebrate. It is possible that any other Chiranjeevi film would have worked just as well on that occasion. In any case, my intention is not to subject our Ongole experience of the film to detailed examination. *Big Boss*, or rather my varied responses to it, stayed in my mind as a puzzle that I could not quite solve. Upon revisiting the film, yet again, a decade later, it is possible for me to suggest that the film's inducement to fandom is striking indeed. I had perhaps *become* a fan, thanks to favourable conditions, in my third viewing of the film in Ongole.

Big Boss is a mass film to the core, but not in the sense that it is likely to appeal only to certain sections of the audience, the so-called masses. The film is singularly dedicated to the construction of the fan-spectator that wills the film into existence. It is shoddily produced, which is quite scandalous given its budget and casting, and also replete with 'movie mistakes' (including a flashback within a flashback, incorrect naming of place of action), poor editing, etc.

The film's director, Vijay Bapineedu, was the editor of *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, and it was on the sets of this film that I spoke to him about the magazine. His involvement in the affairs of fans is likely to have played some role in determining the shape of the film and its saturation with cues that are meant to be picked up by fans 'in the know'. There is no need to read too much into the director's biography because, by this time, the Chiranjeevi vehicle was, in any case, enveloped by a web

of intertextual references and other forms of play with star recognition. There are two striking elements in this film: first, the centrality of the figure of the fan to the imaging of political subjects who are led by the star-protagonist, and second, the relationship they in turn have with the hero.

Prasad (1998: 138–59) notes that by the 1970s, the Hindi film hero's companion was already transformed into a fan or admirer of the character. This development is evident in Telugu films, too. Unlike anything that we have seen in the previous appearances of the comedian-cum-admirer, this film has a Chiranjeevi fan, who is seen worshipping a cutout of the star when the Chiranjeevi character (Surendra) meets him for the first time. This fan also *believes*, in spite of the insistence of Surendra, that he has indeed been blessed by the arrival of the star into his life. Through the rest of the film, he refuses to make the distinction between the character and the star and treats Surendra as if he would his idol, and eventually dies to save him from a time bomb set by the villains.

If conditional loyalty is the key to understanding the domains of fans proper, what does the examination of the mass film do to strengthen or challenge this understanding? The deployment of the figure of the fan flags the film's larger attempt to define a *political* relationship between star-protagonist and the masses within the fiction. Surendra is Big Boss, the leader of a basti. At different points of time in the film, a large crowd is, at once, the passive addressee and witness of actions that he performs. But the masses are much more than supplicants. They have entitlements and the star-protagonist for his part is obliged to act on their behalf, even at the expense of his relationship with his family members.

The film's story revolves around the evolution of the unemployed youth Bavaraju Surendra, Ba.Su. (or Boss as his friends call him) into a slumlord. Through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that Surendra is the descendent of a zamindari family seeking revenge against his paternal uncle, Varadaraju (Kota Srinivas Rao) and his wife Damayanti (Jyothilakshmi, the legendary screen vamp of the 1970s), who killed his father and grandfather, made his brother a cripple, and banished his family from a life of luxury. Knowing that his mother would not approve of his attempts to seek revenge, he secretly rejects job offers and moves to Hyderabad, where the villains have become important members of the city's underworld. In the city, he confronts the son of the benevolent gangster Ankineedu (Vijay Chander) for assaulting

Durga (Madhavi, Surendra's landlady). Ankineedu is impressed with Surendra and offers him a job but the latter turns it down. The chief villains, Varadaraju and Damayanti, convince Ankineedu's son to kill his father and take over the gang. Ankineedu is killed but Surendra drives Ramineedu away from the basti and becomes the 'Boss' of the locality. Varadaraju, with the help of the corrupt police official, Yadagiri (Tanikella Bharani), makes a number of attempts to defeat Surendra by targeting his family. Surendra's mother (Sujata) and brother (Sivaji) are brought to Hyderabad by a family friend. Yadagiri marries Surendra's sister (Kalpana) and recruits her to pressurize the hero to accept the false charges fabricated by the police. Surendra's mother (Sujata), who does not approve of her son's attempt to seek revenge, persuades him to perform the 40-day ritual associated with Lord Ayyappa, which, among other things prohibits the devotees from displaying anger. Yadagiri inadvertently disrupts the ritual and triggers off events leading to the final confrontation between the villain and Surendra. In the film's climax, Surendra kills the villain with his mother's approval.

In terms of its thematic concerns, too, the film is a typical mass film. The crisis in the feudal family is traceable to events that took place a generation earlier, after Varadaraju, the eldest son of the zamindar (Somayajulu), is discovered to be a criminal. The flashback within the flashback in the film, in fact, begins with the disruption of the family's celebration of Independence Day, with the arrival of Varadaraju at the site of the gathering, being chased by the police. The zamindar hands him over to the police and decides to disinherit him. Damayanti seduces the family lawyer and has the text of the documents changed. She then kills the old man and Varadaraju kills the lawyer. As it turns out, Damayanti gives birth to the lawyer's son. For his part, the chief villain has the mannerisms of a *hijra* (trans-gendered person) and even calls himself a 'two-in-one' person, openly hinting at his indeterminate gender status. All the families we come across in the film are fractured and also similarly marked by the absence or the inadequacy of male authority figures. These include, in addition to Surendra's family, Durga's family (she is a widow), and that of Ankineedu (he is presumably a widower and has little control over his son), and the heroine Roja (she does not have a mother, her father is crippled by the villains, and she grows up to be a petty crook, with her grandmother as her chief assistant). Finally, there is Varadaraju, Damayanti, and their illegitimate son.

In the mass film, especially from the late 1990s, we notice that the illegitimacy of authority is gendered in interesting ways: transgendered men and/or aggressive women (often widows, vamps, and women separated from or dominating their husbands) are important signs of the absence of legitimate authority figures.[25] In the next chapter, I will discuss the critical importance of the displays of the hero's 'surplus' masculinity in the mass film's attempt at resolving the crisis. The female characters of this film are striking. First, there are a number of female characters with significant roles.[26] With the exception of the hero's sister, who finds an exploitative husband (Yadagiri, the corrupt police official), all of them are marked by their detachment from male authority, and this is presented as an important sign of the problem which the hero will solve. In *Big Boss*, the back and forth movement of the film alerts us to the extent to which movement into the future resembles, and is dependent on, the nostalgia for the past, destroyed by Varadaraju and Damayanti, the hijra-vamp couple.

In the film, orphanhood has a societal dimension: the basti is characterized by the absence of the authority/protector figure and is ruled by illegitimate authorities. At one point, Surendra drags Ramineedu to Ankineedu and reminds the old man that Durga, assaulted by the latter, was under the gang's protection. Ankineedu, represented as a gentleman gangster, immediately sees the point and slaps his son in public, to make his displeasure clear. So when Surendra steps into Ankineedu's shoes, we see that he is doing so by displacing an *illegitimate claimant to Ankineedu's legacy*. When the film begins, Surendra has already solved the problem at the societal level and is left with the much more challenging task of 'reclaiming what was once ours': the feudal inheritance, not only the palatial house belonging to his grandfather, but also a family organized around a benevolent male authority.

As in the films of the earlier generation of superstars, NTR and MGR, the reorganization of the family and society are neatly fused together—the same villains cause the disintegration of both. Vigilantism is the solution to the problems faced in both the private and public domains. Also sourced from the later films of NTR, is the importance of the problem of generation change and inheritance: of the responsibility and authority of a younger star-protagonist who will emerge as the new centre of family and society. The newness of the mass film, as pointed out earlier, lies in the movement of the genre away from making direct links between a parental authority figure and his successor (as in the films featuring NTR in double roles of father and son).[27] The

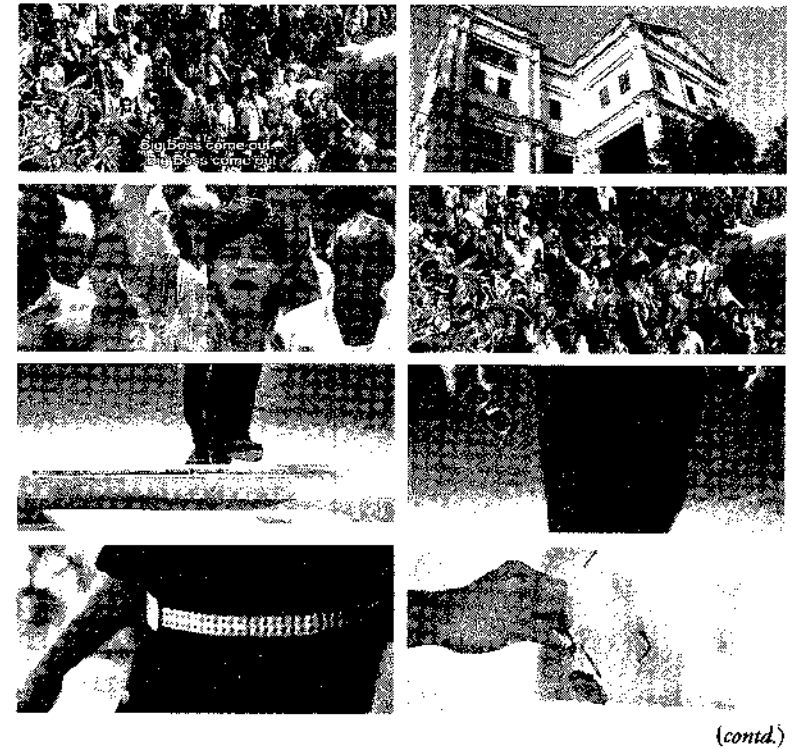
authentication of the authority figure of the mass film is not founded on his age, but occurs in spite of his youth. To understand how this happens, we need to examine how the genre deploys stars.

The mass film's amplification of techniques, identified with an earlier generation of stars, reaches something of a high point in the early 1990s work of Chiranjeevi, and this film is a good example of the level of sophistication achieved by the genre by this time. In the following pages, I will draw attention to the underlying populism of the generic techniques of the mass film that are deployed in *Big Boss*.

'Big Boss Must Come Out'

The film opens with a large crowd looking at the camera, which is placed at a higher level. The crowd is chanting 'Big Boss *baitaku raavaali*' (Big Boss must come out). Leading the crowd is the comedian, Ali, whose role as the shopkeeper and Chiranjeevi's fan we are as yet unaware of. The reverse shot reveals the empty balcony of an imposing

'Big Boss Must Come Out'



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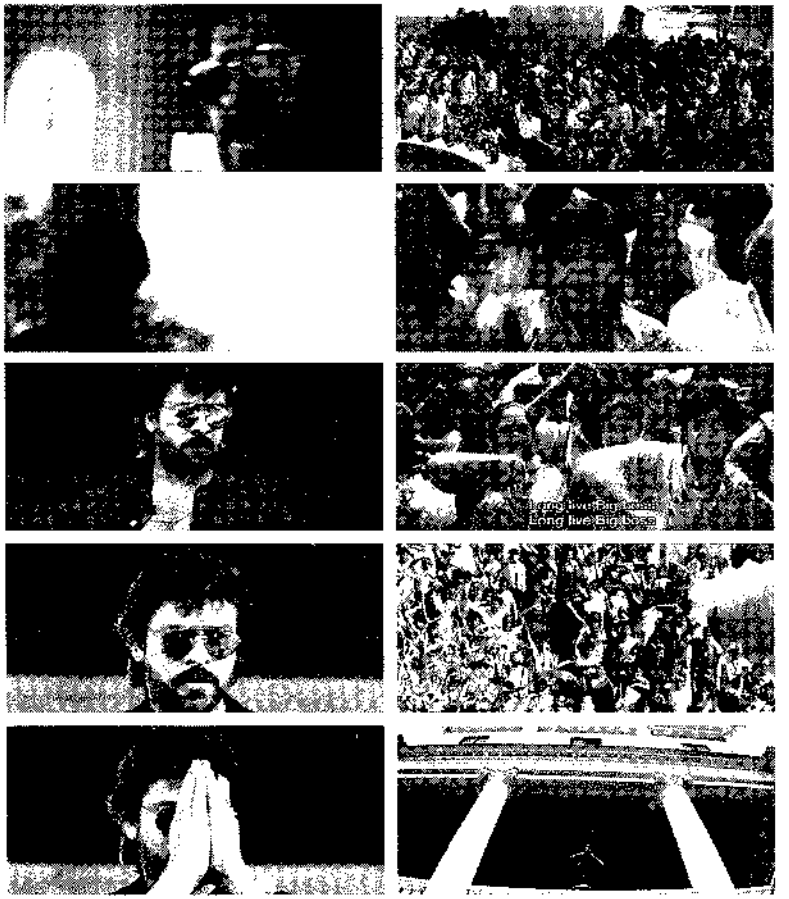


Segment I: The crowd chants, the Boss comes to the balcony and greets the crowd as it erupts into a cheer. Notice that the camera revolves clockwise around the star as he comes out of the house.

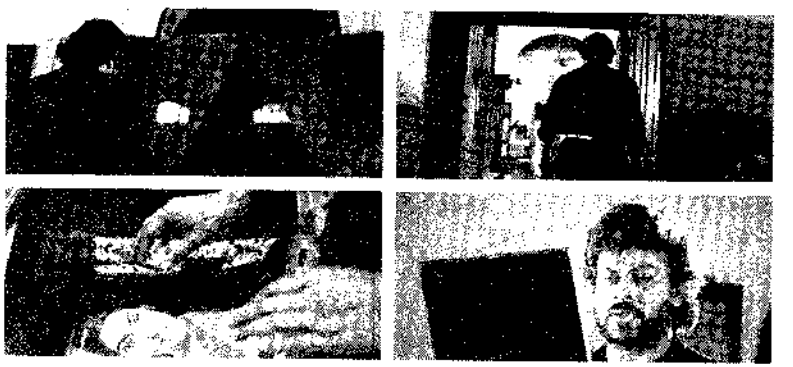
building. There is a cut to the inside of the building, the camera's point of view now coinciding with a person moving to a door. The door flings open and the camera now begins to reveal parts of the character moving towards the balcony railing, starting with his feet, even as it revolves around him. This is, of course, Chiranjeevi. When the crowd sights him/camera, they break into a cheer and he waves back and then salutes the crowd/camera with folded hands. The relay between crowd, camera, and star continues through the rest of this short sequence, in which members of the crowd sing his praises. A man thanks him for ridding

the basti of rowdy *mamullu* (protection fees), while a woman is grateful to him for saving their families/domestic life (*samsaralu*). Big Boss assures them that he is always willing to kill or be killed in his battle against evil. The crowd claps and he turns and goes back inside.

The ability of the spectator to relay information to the star protagonist, surfaces on a number of occasions in the film. The spectator of the film is a privileged entity, indeed, and this is established during the opening sequence itself. When Big Boss gets past the doorway leading inside, he pauses and half turns, as if instructing invisible assistants and the doors shut on the camera. The next cut is to the other side of the closed doors: the crowd has now been left outside and the spectator—who is no

Segment II: Members of the crowd praise the Boss. He gives them an assurance that he is willing to kill or be killed in his battle against evil.

Segment III: He turns away from the balcony, goes inside his house and is followed by the camera. He speaks to his mother's photograph saying, 'We have to regain what we have lost'. The film's first flashback begins at this point.



longer a part of the crowd but has special access to the protagonist—is alone with him. The camera peers over the shoulder of Big Boss to show him talking to the photograph of his mother, acknowledging that she would disapprove of him turning into a Boss/gangster in the city. He is, nevertheless, obliged to fulfil his responsibilities as her son. He tells the photograph, 'We have to regain what we have lost'. There is a close-up on the framed photograph and the movie cuts to the past. His story unfolds for the benefit of the spectator alone—the diegetic listener is completely done away with.

I will return to the film's flashback below, and will stay with the star-spectator relationship for now. One set of 'movie mistakes' in the film is a direct consequence of this relationship. We notice that, on a number of occasions, Surendra turns up quite inexplicably in the vicinity of places where villains are scheming. The film does not even bother to show him looking at or listening to the villains secretly, in order to establish a realistic link between the event/conversation that occurred before the camera and the hero's awareness of what transpired. Instead, he is seen at a distance from the scene of action, merely looking in the general direction of the camera, suggesting that the relay between the star and the spectator's point of view is at issue and not the establishment of the fact of his looking at/hearing something. For example, early in the flashback narrative, as he gets off the bus at Hyderabad, he 'sees' a meeting between the local gangsters. The issue is a territorial dispute and the incident establishes Ankineedu's sense of honour and Varadaraju's villainy. During the long exchange and a shootout between the gangsters, Surendra is on a bridge, which presumably overlooks the scene of action. Quite clearly the bridge is not a part of the geography of the confrontation, which occurs on a large open ground. There is actually no need for the hero to be shown as being present near the scene of action at all because, in most Indian films, the flashback is only a notional narration of the story from a character's point of view. Indeed, this film has a flashback within the flashback, which reveals events that occurred during the hero's childhood, and in this narrative, the hero simply knows about the evil deeds of his uncle and aunt without the child being present anywhere near the scene. The 'mistake', thus, is for the film to make the extra effort and to have Surendra appear on the scene of the gangsters' meeting and yet not establish the plausibility of him actually witnessing the action. The sequence is, nevertheless, necessary because it establishes the relay between the spectator's knowledge and the protagonist's. The hero has to be somewhere near the site of

action, only to ensure the establishment of eye contact confirming the relay of knowledge. On another occasion, Surendra is seen loitering at a distance from Varadaraju's house, just after the latter and his wife tell Ankineedu's son to kill the old man. Surendra moves on immediately after the camera spots him.

The most remarkable of these movie mistakes occurs after the first confrontation between Surendra and the villains, soon after moving into the basti. He captures a murderer and hands him over to the police. At the police station, Surendra actually claims to be an *eyewitness* to the murder, although he is seen inside the house while the murder is taking place in another part of the basti and it is only the scream of the dying man, which draws Surendra outdoors. Surendra has not seen the murder, but, nevertheless, *knows* who the murderer is because the *spectator* has seen him.

Returning to the discussion of the genre's references to the 'biography' of the star, it is now possible for us to see that the star-spectator relationship is critically dependent on the latter's constant awareness of the fact of the protagonist's stardom. The spectator cannot but be aware at all times that the character is the star in disguise. Even by mass film standards, the length to which *Big Boss* goes to foreground the presence of Chiranjeevi-the-star in the fiction is remarkable. Earlier, I mentioned in passing a song shot before a gathering of Chiranjeevi fans in which the star plays himself. One of the lines in this song, which is sung by the star, is: *Na laife na fans* (my life is my fans). At various points in the film, we see posters of his films and copies of *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, hear the titles of his films, snatches of songs, and one-liners from earlier films.

Big Boss allows us to see that the spectator's knowledge is of two kinds. First, it is cognitive: the ability to recognize the star, not just as such-and-such person, but as someone who is an agent of spectatorial expectation and fulfilment, who is at all times trusted and at times commanded. Second, it has to do with history: the star is the embodiment of a screen history, one that certainly includes his previous roles but also recalls the memory of the pleasure of cinema itself. This knowledge is worked into the structuring of the film's narrative to create a protagonist who, like the star himself, has a past that over-determines his present actions. The production of Surendra along the twin axes of pastness—of the star and the character—is critical to the film. While the multiple intertextual references to Chiranjeevi's stardom constitute one axis, the other revolves around the complicated flashbacks of the film.

There is Always a Flashback

In the mass film, there is *always* a flashback. This narrative device is as ubiquitous as the biographical reference. The stories inevitably begin in *media res* and the narration of past events occurs in the form of the full-blown flashback, running into half an hour or more. This is preceded by flashback fragments or other hints anticipating the longer narration. In *Big Boss,* there is a flashback within a flashback, which is anticipated through a series of hints. The first sign of the second flashback is the hero's glance at a dilapidated old building when he arrives at Hyderabad in the first flashback. We immediately recognize it as the building from which Big Boss waved to his supporters in the opening sequence and realize that the past and future are closely related. In the second flashback, it is revealed that this is the same building in which the extended family lived during Surendra's childhood and the one he will take over as a part of his attempt to 'regain what was ours'.

The flashback is the fictional equivalent of the star-as-real-person that the genre constantly gestures towards. Surendra, now Big Boss, and in the first flashback, an unemployed youth, is actually more than an unemployed youth-turned-gangster. At the back of it all is the awareness of the n+1st level of distinction: he is Chiranjeevi at all times but his distinction is demonstrable at the fictional level, too, and it is to this effect that the flashback is deployed. There is no mystery or suspense in the back and forth movement of the story because the 'revelation' is along expected lines (after all the flashback is a formulaic element). At issue, therefore, is not the supposed innocence of the spectator but her acute awareness of the rules of the game and therefore the investment in the fiction and the star himself.

What is revealed, at the story level, in the course of the flashback narratives in *Big Boss*? A feudal past, vendetta and a motive for revenge. Apparently, the film is making a double regression: the first being a return to the feudal origins as a source of the hero's distinction, which could be read as regression since the mass film, in general, and Chiranjeevi's vehicles, in particular, often did away with this mode of justifying the hero's distinction; and the second, the more interesting regression in the mass film as a whole, the avenging of a personal/familial wrong, and not a societal one. This double regression eventually justifies the hero's final confrontation with the villain. Flashback revelations establish the continuity between the breakdown of the social order (not to mention law and order) and the crisis in the family. There is also a demonstrable equivalence between two sets of obligations of Surendra: to family and

friends on the one hand, and the society, where *pure altruism* of the hero is established, on the other. On the face of it, altruism is secondary to familial obligations because the hero's actions are so clearly guided by personal revenge.

Big Boss maintains the distinction between the two sets of obligations of the hero and even creates a tension between them on occasion. For example, when Surendra's sister comes to him with a request to accept the false charges of the police, the women of the *basti,* led by Durga, argue that he should not do so, not even for the sake of his sister. Surendra refuses to accede to his sister's wishes. How and why the film makes the distinction between these two sets of obligations, which not only converge on the elimination of the villains but are also simultaneously in conflict, is a significant aspect of its populism.

The film has two beginnings, one set in the present, and the other, in the past, when the hero was still an unemployed youth. The star is introduced twice over, first in the 'Big Boss *baitaku raavaali*' sequence (discussed above), and then in the flashback, when he drives away bootleggers who have taken over the freedom fighters' land. The film also has two endings. There is the literal ending, when the story finally draws to a close with the killing of the villains. But prior to that, there is another climax of sorts, when the film's moment of irrationality occurs. This climax allows us to see clearly how the film relates to, but simultaneously distinguishes between the two tasks of the hero (seeking revenge and cleaning up society of illegitimate authority figures).

The moment of irrationality comes as the fitting response to the prolonged display of cruelty by Yadagiri, now Surendra's brother-in-law. Yadagari's atrocities are committed against the public gathered before the house, as also Surendra's brother and mother. The confrontation between the police officer and hero also takes place in full view of the public. This is the climax *for the masses*—on the screen and before it—and unfolds with their active encouragement and against the explicitly expressed wishes of Surendra's mother, who has not only persuaded him to perform the Ayyappa ritual but also remain indoors while Yadagiri is on a rampage outside. I will discuss this in some detail below.

There is a qualitative difference between the emotional charge of the first or mass climax and the second or family sentiment climax, which, in spite of its high degree of violence, comes across as a fairly routine affair, of the kind that has repeaters leaving the cinema hall. Why should this be the case when the story seems to suggest that the

chief motivation for the hero's actions is avenging the harm done to his family by the villains? Presumably, the narrative works to ensure that the obligations of the hero to the society are not rendered insignificant, but this is hardly an explanation because the explanation does not lie at the story level at all.

In very different ways, *Mutha Mestri*, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, and *Big Boss* unravel the working of cinematic populism. A story level justification for the production of spectatorial effect is quite clearly a pre-requisite for both films. In *Mutha Mestri*, where the hero's final confrontation with the villains is triggered off by the sister's suicide, the protagonist's personal tragedy ensures that the justification for his subsequent actions (which include his resignation as minister) is made on emotional grounds. In *Big Boss* however, the actual act of revenge—and the death of the main villains—is more of a story level necessity. The most emotionally charged, and therefore satisfying, climax is already over by the time the film arrives at its ending. This, too, is a 'movie mistake', in a manner of speaking, because the climax, by definition, comes at the end of the film. By splitting the climax into two parts, the film allows us to see how the narrative has to work to make the spectator *want to determine the course of action*. And in the mass film's scheme of things, a kid-goat might do just as well as a dead father.

'Your Honour, What Sin did the Innocent Kid-Goat Commit ...?'

A good starting point for the discussion in this section is M. Madhava Prasad's argument on the *aesthetic of mobilization* (1998: 138–159). He coins the phrase in his discussion of the 1970s vehicles of Amitabh Bachchan, which, he points out, are quite centrally concerned with the on-screen mobilization of various groups of usually underprivileged people under the leadership of the hero. He sums up his arguments thus:

> The originality of the textual form [which draws on borrowed sources like the Western] derives primarily from the mobilization effect which accompanies the narration. The scenes of nomination, in which the hero is elected to lead workers and minorities, function to extend the relationship of leader and the led to the audience as well. The figure who commands the audience in this way is the star. The star's function is mobilization, the rallying of forces behind a narrative exposition. This elevation compensates for the loss of the hero's traditional authority, and enacts a transition from feudal to populist power. Through the production of a supplemental charisma, the industry overcomes the problems posed by a shift of narrative focus to the realm of the ordinary (p. 158).

The presence of diegetic audiences, as passive witnesses of the protagonist's heroism, is one of the signs of this aesthetic at work. Prasad goes on to note that the extra-cinematic authority, which accrues, due to the carrying over of the star-as-mobilizer image, not only from film to film but also from beyond the screen into the 'real' world, was unprecedented in Hindi cinema but was well in place in south Indian industries, where, stars were already mobilizers. He makes two additional points. First, 'Amitabh Bachchan did not enter politics until much later in his career, but, even in the formative stage, his star-image had a political dimension that paralleled MGR's.' So, whereas in MGR's case, screen mobilization was simultaneous with off-screen political activity, in Bachchan's case—like NTR's and Chiranjeevi's—the actual transition into politics was a later development.

More importantly, '[t]he Amitabh Bachchan phenomenon can be said to represent the arrival of populism on the national arena. Populism, employing the supplement of charisma produced in the scenes of election and nomination, enables the control of the text's meaning-production from a point outside it' (p. 158).

I have some problems with Prasad's conceptualization of how stars work, on- and off-screen. Prasad makes an easy connection between Bachchan's vehicles and his stint as politician. In comparison with both MGR and NTR, Bachchan has been a relatively minor politician, although the three of them can be said to have had a similar stature as stars. NTR featured in the remakes of Bachchan's film and both stars entered the political arena in the early 1980s. However, there is really no comparison between the two as politicians.[28] Nevertheless, Prasad's concept is an important starting point for an inquiry into the relationships between stars' on- and off-screen mobilizations and it does so by noting the analogy between the locations of the star vis-à-vis the masses in both films and society. Prasad's later work (1999) draws attention to the specificity of south Indian stars in politics, and, interestingly, he does not return to the aesthetic of mobilization in it. This is perhaps a sign that Prasad's earlier explanatory frame does not work as well with south Indian stars, as against Bachchan.

My argument, tries to locate populism at the level of spectatorial positioning, which is undoubtedly reinforced by populist themes of the

mass film and requires the presence of on-screen crowds, too, in its mass film avatar. To say that the star of the mass film is seen leading the masses would be to state the obvious, but an inadequate explanation for how a film can be claimed to be populist. We need to explain the complex relationship between the star, the diegetic masses, and the spectator. I will build my case with the help of the moment of irrationality in *Big Boss*.

First, let me discount the obvious: the scene in question unfolds before a huge crowd of diegetic onlookers and the hero, no doubt, represents the masses and acts on their behalf, reducing them to cheering bystanders. But the key element in the structuring of the sequence is spectatorial anticipation or will.

In order to draw attention to the intended emotional effect of the sequence in question and the production of affect as its *raison d'être*, I will begin at a point after the action is fully over and the hero stands before a judge, accused of assaulting a police officer (Yadagiri, his brother-in-law). The judge asks Surendra whether or not he assaulted the inspector. He replies in the affirmative and in his defence lists the misdeeds of the inspector that provoked him to act. He lists them in the exact sequence that they occurred: Yadagiri terrorized the crowd and even caused a miscarriage, etc. At one point Surendra asks the judge: 'Your honour, what sin did the innocent kid-goat commit…?'

It is amusing that Surendra refers to the ill treatment of the kid-goat with the same degree of passion as the serious crimes committed by the inspector. But the juxtaposition is intended to recruit the judge as a collaborator, after the event, in an act of retaliatory violence that was willed by the spectator. In fact, *Surendra recalls for the judge what the spectator saw*—he himself was locked up inside his house while Yadagiri was on rampage. The courtroom speech attempts to extend the affective economy of the just concluded moment of irrationality into the space of the court: therefore the kid-goat.

The moment of irrationality in *Big Boss* is a good example of how a narrative crisis is created in the mass film, in spite of the superhuman abilities of the genre's hero. In *Gangleader* and in *Big Boss*, the hero is prevented from confronting problems head-on because of familial obligations. In *Gangleader*, the source of the family's suffering is the hero's misguided sister-in-law and in *Big Boss* it is his mother's refusal to allow him to battle the villain. The mother persuades him to undertake the Ayyappa swamy *deeksha*, which involves the abstinence from meat, liquor, sex, and display of emotions.[29] The sequence begins with the

hero undertaking the *deeksha*. He is dressed in the black dress of the Ayyappa devotee and receives the mala, which marks the beginning of the ritual.

Just as Surendra begins to eat his yellow and insipid-looking vegetarian meal, Yadagiri arrives and begins to shout abuses at him. He has come to implicate Surendra in a murder that the latter did not commit and decides to make a production of the event. He begins by abusing Surendra before the public that gathers before the house. Yadagiri is confronted by the *basti* dwellers who are offended by his insults to the Big Boss. When he slaps a young man who questions him, the latter's pregnant wife warns him that an abuse to their hero will result in a retaliation even from unborn children. At this point Yadagiri hits her on her stomach, saying he will not wait for such children to be born. She faints and is rushed to hospital. He then picks up a kid-goat, presumably belonging to Surendra's brother, and hurls it to the ground. Surendra's handicapped brother protests, only to be hit by the inspector. The mother then comes out of the house and tells Yadagiri that Surendra is doing pooja. With a view to bringing Surendra out, he slaps the mother too. Surendra comes out but does not retaliate. Yadagiri ridicules his *deeksha* and pulls at his mala. When mala snaps, Surendra is released from his vow to his mother and god. He takes off his black shirt, wipes the vermillion off his forehead, and thrashes the inspector as the crowd takes up the Ayyappa devotee's chant: 'Swamy Saranam, Ayyappa Saranam'.

Through much of the sequence, there is a clear spatial separation between Yadagiri and Surendra. Yadagiri's behaviour is prompted by the need to bring Surendra out of the house. Each time he performs an act of cruelty before the crowd outside, there is a cut to Surendra who is seen reacting instantly with shock or pain, inside, as if he is a witness to what is happening. These cuts ensure that the spectator is at once positioned as a member of the crowd but also acts as the relay of the crowd's point of view to the hero, establishing a link between Surendra and the crowd outside. There is a further link that is established. As with some other occurrences of the moment of irrationality in this film, too, there is an invocation of god as a critical pivot in the relay between various places, characters, and points of view. While Surendra offers *arti* to the idol of Ayyappa he looks directly at the camera, as if it is the god who approximates to the camera, watching Surendra and the events outside. But he could well be offering *arti* to the spectator, reminding him of his power to make things happen. A change of course in the flow

of events is only expected now because a crisis point has been reached in the narrative, with the hero being rendered impotent.

The structuring of the sequence allows for a fascinating inversion: *the spectator is god*, not a passive witness to the events that fold. The actions of Yadagiri enhance the spectator's expectation of a suitably violent reaction from the hero. However, one more critical development precedes/accompanies the fighting. Once his necklace is broken, Surendra prepares himself elaborately for the fight. While he is preparing to address spectatorial expectation, the crowd begins to *act out* the spectator's sense of anticipation and relief by cheering Surendra on with the chant 'Swamy Saranam...' The camera, now, alternately revolves around Surendra and from the centre of the circle formed by the crowd, he sees the crowd seeing him. The masses and their hero are now visually and spatially linked. The crisis passes over.

In *Big Boss*, as in other major mass films of the 1990s, populism can be located at two distinct levels. The first is at the level of its fiction. The

The Innocent Kid-Goat

(contd.)

presence of crowds, the hero's ability to protect their interests, and in the process relegating them to the position of a diegetic audience, would be the obvious signs of this level of the elaboration of populism. This level is accounted for by Prasad's notion of the aesthetic of mobilization. The second is at the level of spectatorial positioning. By deploying a variety of techniques, the film constantly reminds the spectator that the fictional world exists for his benefit and unfolds along anticipated lines.

The political role played by the star in the fiction, is an extension of his mandate to act according to the spectator's will. This role—of being the agent of the spectator's will, of displaying at all times the recognition of an obligation to a spectator who is in turn entitled to make a series of demands on him—played by the star in the fiction, is analogous to his location in the fan domain. In both domains the star is obliged to fulfil the demands of the fan/spectator. Fandom, in turn, is evidence of the leakage of the willing spectator into the extra-cinematic domain, even as there is a textual inscription of the fan in the production of the genre's spectator.

An actual fan—a member of a fans' association—is not the same as the fan-spectator, who is but an abstraction. Simultaneously, in spite of the minority status of the actual fan vis-à-vis the film viewing public and his obvious and offensive/embarrassing excesses, there is no reason to be believe that the fan has a qualitatively different relationship with the fan-spectator, from decent people like us. The film invites all viewers

to be approximate to the fan-spectator. The fact of the matter is that no one is fully transformed into this entity. The degrees of separation between different audience groups may be striking at times (discussed in Chapter 4).

The moment of irrationality, whose inverse logic ensures that events unfold according to the injunctions of the willing spectator, made a brief but notable appearance during Chiranjeevi's first media conference on 17 August 2008, formally announcing his decision to enter politics. During his replies to reporters' questions, Chiranjeevi not only made repeated references to his films (he even recalled a line from *Tagore*) and film titles (especially *Andarivadu* [everybody's man]), but also insisted that he was entering politics because he was being called upon to do

(*contd.*)

so by the people. He drew attention to a suicide note left by a fan/supporter (in February 2008) appealing to the star to improve the lives of common people by entering politics.[30] In politics as in films, the star arrives only because the fan-spectator was whistling interminably.

Let me not give the impression that the willing spectator surfaces only in Telugu and other south Indian cinemas, or that this entity inevitably finds itself thrust into electoral politics. In the Hindi film *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan 2008), which exemplifies Ashish Rajadhyaksha's notion of the Bollywoodization of Indian cinema (2003) to the last window of revenue, Shah Rukh Khan plays the role of the endearing but bumbling fool of a movie extra. The one thing that the extra gets right is his understanding of how cinema works. He figures out that if

you will it hard and long enough, it will happen. The film cannot be said to be over till then. He tries to apply this principle to life, realizes that it does not work and dies. In the second half Shah Rukh Khan reappears, this time as a highly successful film star who does not know his cinema because he inherited his stardom from his father. The problem that the narrative now addresses is one of transferring critical insights and knowledge (the latter is plot related) that the dead extra had, to the star. The star is soon possessed by the dead extra, who, like the film spectator belongs to another time. The star soon learns that stardom is about becoming what the spectator wants him to. That is not all. In the film's climax, the star is so engrossed in the extra's revenge drama that he now becomes the willing spectator and brings the latter's heartthrob and heroine of yesteryears (Deepika Padukone) back from the dead. The ghost of the dead heroine appears and plays the role (of a ghost) that the star, transformed into a spectator of the spectacle that he has himself conjured, had auditioned a female fan (Deepika Padukone) to do. The film thus comes full circle, with the star not only becoming what the spectator wanted him to but also the bystander that the extra always was, while the ghost kills the villain. It is a happy ending.

In the next chapter, I will focus on the roles played by the star in mass films to further develop my argument on cinematic populism. What use does the mass film find for its star-protagonist, whose distinction and star status the spectator is never allowed to forget? To stay with *Om Shanti Om* just for one moment longer, why are there two Shah Rukh Khan characters in the film?

2. After NTR: Telugu Mass Film and Cinematic Populism

1. The film magazine, *Super Hit* is one of my most valuable sources of information and I cite it often throughout this book. The magazine, like a number of popular magazines, does not usually come with page numbers.
2. The exact number of films of each genre in a given year is difficult to determine. K. Narasaiah (1986, discussed below) is among the few film critics who commented on emerging generic tendencies. Going by the titles of films in the film industry's official filmography in Murari (nd) we can conclude that the mythological and folklore film were phased out by the late 1970s.
3. In the 1970s, NTR acted in the Telugu remakes of Bachchan vehicles, notably *Nippulanti Manishi* (S.D. Lal 1974) and later *Yugandhar* (K.S.R. Doss 1979), based on *Zanjeer* (Prakash Mehra 1973) and *Don* (Chandra Barot 1978), respectively.
4. I have discussed the film industry's business model in some detail in Srinivas (2006b). In Chapter 5, I return to the issue with specific reference to Chiranjeevi's career. Film critic, Srihari (1986 and 1992) points out that this model resulted in major losses for investors and also created sharp declines in film production, every once in a while.
5. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999) report that in 1977 there were 99 Telugu productions, and in 1995 they grew to 168 (31–2). In 1977, MGR became Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and Telugu productions had touched a new record level in that year. NTR died in early 1996, which was also the worst year in Chiranjeevi's film career. According to Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber of Commerce (1981: 131), there were 1904 cinemas in Andhra Pradesh in 1980. *A.P. Film Diary 1995* lists a total of 3080 cinemas. They declined to 2763 in 2000 according to *Screen Weekly* (4 August 2000).
6. Claims about Chiranjeevi's status as a completely self-made man, unlike Balakrishna who was promoted by his father in the early stages of his career, need to be moderated by the fact that in 1980, the former married the daughter of the highly respected actor-producer Allu Ramalingaiah. Geetha Arts, the production company established by Allu senior and subsequently run by his son, Aravind, starting in 1982, made more films with the star than any other production company (Kumar 2004: 165).
7. Chiranjeevi used these terms to describe some of his early work, including *Pranam Khareedu*. Interview, Madras, 22 January 1995.
8. The genre drew the strong condemnation of radical left publications with Naxalite sympathies. See for example, the essay on Madala Ranga Rao, the star of the early 1980s red film, by Jinka (1982).

9. See Mohanty (1977), Ray (1988), Banerjee (1980), and Das Gupta (1975) for detailed analyses of the Naxalite movement. See Balagopal (1988) for a discussion on the impact and achievements of the movement in Andhra Pradesh.
10. The Land Reforms Bill was passed in 1972 and came into force in 1973. A number of studies on the implementation of land reforms in the state have drawn attention to its failure. C. Francis (1992), citing the Task Force appointed by the Planning Commission of India, lists the following reason for the failure: lack of political will by the government, legal hurdles (which resulted in litigations holding up the distribution of over two lakh acres), and absence of correct land records. He adds that the administrators and politicians, were influenced by and sympathetic to landlords.
11. See Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (1996) for the full text of the early reports of the organization.
12. See Sumanta Banerjee (1985) for an analysis of the anti-feudal poetry and songs by poets sympathetic to the Naxalite movement.
13. In *Bobbili Puli* (Dasari Narayana Rao 1982), NTR plays the role of Chakradhar, an army major turned rebel. His father Satyam/Sankaraiah (Satyanarayana) is an army deserter turned fake sadhu. Satyam, in addition to being a criminal, also kills his wife. Chakradhar, now known as Bobbili Puli, the Tiger of Bobbili, surrenders to the police after killing his father.
14. *Pedaraayudu* revolves around the relationship between the hereditary village headman Pedarayudu (Mohan Babu), who is also the sole judicial authority of the village community, and his younger brother Raja (also played by Mohan Babu). Pedarayudu's family is involved in a feud with the villains, who are descendents of the local zamindar (Chalapathi Rao). When Raja is falsely accused of murdering the local school teacher, Pedarayudu, misled by the villains, excommunicates Raja and his pregnant wife. With the brothers separated, the villains intensify their attacks on Pedarayudu's family. Finally, the brothers are reconciled and the villains defeated. However, Pedarayudu realizes that he made a wrong judgement in his brother's case and dies. His wife collapses at his feet and dies. The film ends with Raja becoming the headman.
15. Venugopal's Interview, 1 May 1997. Chiranjeevi's popular 'biographies' by Ambadipudi (nd) and Kasivisweswara Rao (1994), too, underscore the star's humble origins.
16. Prasad (1998: 188–216), in his discussion of the representation of the feudal in New Indian Cinema, draws attention to the fascination these films had for the feudal order. He identifies as a common feature 'the use of sexuality as a site of exploration of the fascinations of feudal power' (194).
17. Yandamuri presented himself as a trendsetter in a popular cultural domain that was marked by the presence of women, writing in weeklies whose readers were presumed to be overwhelmingly female. Drawing on American

and British popular fiction, Yandamuri introduced a range of themes and genres hitherto relegated to the Telugu 'detective novel'. *Detective navala*, as it is called in Telugu, is a broad category of popular literature in Telugu, which includes writings that might otherwise be classified either as crime fiction, spy thrillers, ghost stories, science-fiction, pornography, or martial arts novels.

18. *Khaidi No.786* (1988), for instance, shows a bad landlord figure who actually acquires his wealth by killing the hero's father. The hero, himself, makes no claim to the wealth, although he knows about his father's murder. Instead, he is quite contented being a music teacher. He becomes a convict when falsely accused of murder, and at this point, he declares war on the villain.
19. Vijayashanti's work has been discussed by Lalitha Gopalan (2003) and Tejaswini Niranjana (2004). These writings are the closest that film scholarship in English has come to the discussion of the Telugu mass film. Niranjana coins the phrase, 'female vigilante film' to describe the 1990s films of Vijayashanti. I will suggest, in passing, that the female vigilante film is the mass film with a female hero. Of significance for our purposes is that in these films, the techniques that were developed from the 1980s to represent the male star, are deployed to represent the female star, who also plays roles that are similar to those of her male counterparts.
20. It can be understood as an 'item' which, in the Bombay film industry terms, is a filmic component that exists for its own sake and does not necessarily contribute to the development of the plot.
21. Naming the character after the star also happens in films made by other industries. Jackie Chan's characters of his Hong Kong productions, for example, have been named Jackie repeatedly.
22. Although I am referring to the Telugu film, coincidentally Bruce Lee's *Big Boss* (Lo Wei 1971), too, has an interesting moment of irrationality when the hero is released from a vow not to fight.
23. *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Manmohan Desai 1977) and *Satte Pe Satta* (Raj N. Sippy 1981), which offer examples of moments of irrationality in the 1970s, surpass the degree of dramatization achieved by contemporaneous Telugu films, regardless of genre. In *Amar Akbar Anthony*, a bhajan revives the mother's sight, while in the latter, the chant of the brothers inspires the Bachchan character, an impostor who has had a change of heart, to rise from the ground and defeat the villains.
24. Naxalite film, also known as the red film (*erra cinema*), is a low budget genre that features Naxalites as protagonists. Armed squads of Naxalites are often seen performing vigilante actions against landlords, corrupt police officials, or politicians and indulging in a variety of populist actions. The genre is traceable to the red films of the early 1980s, which were often made by communist sympathizers. Naxalite film acquired a sizable market in the Telangana region in the mid- to late 1990s, even as some films went on to become major hits during their period. I will discuss this genre briefly in Chapter 5.
25. In the 'female vigilante film' featuring Vijayashanti, we notice similar signs of the disintegration of the familial and the social. The female vigilante is, at once, a part of the problem and its solution.
26. Six to be precise: the female villain, the hero's mother and sister, Durga, Roja, and her grandmother (Nirmala).
27. Interestingly, in the mid-1990s, Chiranjeevi returned to the NTR model in *Rickshawvodu* (Kodi Ramakrishna 1995) to play the double role of father and son, a zamindar and a rickshaw driver, respectively. This was a part of a wider regional tendency, shared by all south Indian industries, to invest in the bygone feudal order as an object of nostalgia. The best example of this tendency in the mass film is *Pedarayudu* (Ravi Raja Pinisetty 1995), featuring Mohan Babu in a double role. For details about NTR's contribution to this moment, see Srinvas (2006b).
28. To put it somewhat provocatively, Bachchan has not yet graduated from being a patch of glamour in the election platform to a significant player in any political formation, be it as a Congressman in the 1980s or a supporter of the Samajwadi Party in the recent past. There are dozens of other stars across the country who had similar, if not better, careers as politicians and decision makers in parties/governments. These include Rajesh Khanna and Vinod Khanna, who had strikingly different star-images from Bachchan.
29. There is a biographical reference here that Kumar's biography alerts us to. Kumar notes that Chiranjeevi is, in fact, an Ayyappa devotee and has undertaken the deeksha almost every year since his Madras days (2004: 237).
30. Press reports attribute the suicide to financial difficulties and mention that, in his suicide note, the fan expressed his regret that he would not be around to see Chiranjeevi come to power. Chiranjeevi responded immediately after the event by providing financial support to the family. For a detailed report on the suicide note and the reactions of the surviving family members of the author of the suicide note, see Online (2008d: 11).