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Heroism in Telugu Cine-Politics

By Nathalie Smallidge

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Faculty Advisor: Victoria Gross

Preceptor: Linnea Turco

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Introduction and Relevance

In 2016, Telugu ‘superstar’ actor Mahesh Babu announced over Twitter of his intended "adoption" of two villages in the South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana after portraying a character onscreen who does the same.¹ While he was initially inspired by a comment from a regional politician² who was promoting a social program in Andhra Pradesh,³ he took up the torch of community support from the example of his family elders who helped their hometowns during their lifetimes. Although the social program served as an initiative under which his village adoption could fall, the influence of family precedent was looked favorably upon by the public. Whether due to the promise of better social programs or the mere publicity of the process, the villagers whose villages were considered for adoption were eager for the recognition. When there was a delay in the adoption process, the villagers became impatient, causing the actor’s wife, a leading Bollywood actress herself, to visit the villages in person and commence the process.⁴ Although this is a singular example of an actor fulfilling offscreen what he demonstrates onscreen, the real-life presence of Telugu film stars in public spaces has been shown to extend to spheres of social and political interests. In this way, these film stars wield a kind of public (and even moral) authority—they are recognizable and respected for the virtuous characters they represent onscreen. In essence, their onscreen heroism translates into offscreen good deeds, or at least the public belief of such, as with the village adoption.

¹ Siva, *Srimanthudu*, 2015.

² PTI 2016.

³ HT Correspondent 2016.

⁴ Unknown, *Deccan Chronicle* 2016.

This example of a ‘hero’s image’ in tandem with his ‘reality’ are the objects of this paper. To better understand the contemporary Telugu hero, we must know some context and history of the Telugu film industry. The film industry in the Telugu-speaking South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana holds a rich legacy extending back to the first years of film making in India. Today, “Tollywood” (Telugu Hollywood) can claim leading statistics in cinema nationwide: Ramoji Film City is the largest production complex in the world and is based in Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana State. The neighboring state Andhra Pradesh has the highest number of movie theaters of all the states in India as of April 2023.⁵ And in 2022, it was the highest grossing film industry in India—surpassing Bollywood. Culturally, popular songs throughout India originate from films, not independent music producers. When a song comes on, the listener, moved by the music, recalls the desirable and talented aura of the hero, a number of whom popularized certain dance moves which themselves are referenced throughout the culture and subsequent films.⁶ As such, cinema is meaningful in Telugu culture.⁷

Beyond the culture of cinema, however, is the symbol or image of the Telugu film hero. One such classic hero is the actor Nandamuri Taraka Ramarao (NTR), who drew the love of fans on the screen as an actor and off the screen as the Chief Minister (CM) of unified Andhra Pradesh (in office 1983-1989, 1994-1995). Talented and diligent, NTR entered the Telugu film industry with innate skill as an actor, inevitably earning roles as deities in Tollywood’s esteemed mythological films,⁸ including one of the greatest produced in India, *Mayabazar*.⁹ He remains one of AP’s beloved politicians, with the lingering benevolent image of distributing sarees and

⁵ Muttevi 2023.

⁶ An example of this is Chiranjeevi’s veena-playing classical-style dance from *Indra*, in the video song *Dayi Dayi Damma* (Gopal 2002).

⁷ C., Sohini 2022.

⁸ Srinivas 2006, 36.

⁹ Reddy 1957, New Delhi Correspondent 2013.

bags of rice to those in need. He even went so far as to enforce an alcohol prohibition when rural Andhra women were experiencing undue hardship in the home from inebriated husbands.¹⁰ Regardless of the effectiveness of his political measures, NTR presented himself as the lived reality of the heroes he symbolized onscreen, set to solve the problems of the Telugu people. NTR emanated this tradition, like a saint bestowing wellbeing onto his disciples. The hagiography of this image was vital to the success and effectiveness of NTR's public authority.

Additional star actors have taken up political life as activists and elected officials, attempting to leverage personal fame and image on screen. One of the mobilization efforts was the political party established by NTR, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP).¹¹ This kicked off a political agenda of enhancing "Telugu pride" which ostensibly sought to overcome the social and linguistic divisions that existed in 'Telugu desam'. Tollywood has also effectively employed this agenda in its films and character appeal, particularly through hero identity. On screen, the greatest heroes act for the cause of Telugu society resulting in heightened Telugu pride.

Just as film heroes can step offscreen and maintain their heroic image, so too have fans stepped up to meet them.¹² Fan associations form around their actor heroes of choice. These associations are public organizations that are unaffiliated with film industry management teams. The fan associations build up the image of Telugu film stars who are disposed to act as vehicles for realizing the public's interest in social engagement, thus enhancing the actors' popularity. The social engagement of these actors does not stop at public appearances and support of causes. Consequently, I explore what the Telugu example can tell us about the overlaps between film and politics broadly.

¹⁰ Mustafa 2023.

¹¹ 'Desam' is the Telugu word for 'country'.

¹² Dickey 1993, Nakassis 2023.

What form does “hero” take in Telugu film, particularly when it can lead to political life for the actor? By attempting to answer this question, I also intend to explore the relationship between Telugu cinema and politics through the lens of heroism. Through my analysis in this paper, I will show how I understand what a hero is, both onscreen and offscreen, according to Telugu film. Additionally, I will evaluate what characteristics make certain actors compelling on and off screen, according to casual online voices such as movie reviewers who publish on public platforms.

I set out on this constructive endeavor to expand the scholarship on South Indian film studies, taking in hand an array of films that tout the “hero” image. My contribution is an attempt to coalesce heroism in Telugu cinema alongside political and social influence Telugu film heroes earn through their roles. Therefore, I aim to explore a mode and medium of storytelling that is shown to influence social and political spheres in South India. The broader significance of my project is to discuss the interconnectedness of film, pop culture, politics, and real-world social changes, the convergence of which can have extensive reach and meaningful consequences. I am particularly drawn to the ‘Telugu film hero’ concept translating into a real-life political hero too, because of the dual pace that life and art can take together. As such, there is feasibility for film heroes to translate into political life the semblance of real-world (i.e., offscreen) heroism, thereby promoting social mobility. I posit that this offscreen promise of social mobility is enhanced through the representation of actors onscreen.

Theory and Argument

I claim that the defining characteristics of the Telugu film hero are not meant to be lost when the hero-actor steps off the screen, especially if he takes up political life. His wholesomeness, moral virtue and authority, physical strength and desirability, social power,

sheer intellect, and unmistakable sense for the Right are qualities he is assumed to retain throughout life. Although art is understood to represent life, there are times when life begins to resemble art instead. Actors can represent politicians and social reformers onscreen, but what happens when those actors become the same offscreen? Somehow, the mythical hero of the film transforms into the realistic hero of our electoral politics. Telugu film-turned-political heroes are larger than life onscreen, which adds to their desirability offscreen.¹³ Moreover, their essence of borderline divine righteousness does not detract from our inclination to emulate them. In fact, it might intensify it. Heroes of antiquity were kings, soldiers, and mythical beings; now, fans hold heroes up as gods and they their worshippers (89).¹⁴ Kusuma defines heroism as having two different outputs: the character itself or the qualities he possesses (90). Be he goes on to say that in South India, a hero can be broadly a popular member of the film production team, and not just the screen actor (90). This will come through in *Indra* below, with the cameo of a renowned vocalist interacting with the film's hero.

The interconnectedness of cultural references as well as the self-referential nature of film (i.e., *magathanam* in *Sarileru Neekevaru*)¹⁵ enthrall viewers and represent something knowable by many. Cultural cues and familiar references contribute to a heightened sense of community, which in the context of Telugu cinema, feeds into the mentality of "Telugu pride." This familiarity and real-life relatability further blur the line between the onscreen and offscreen hero.

I. A Dynastic Industry

Prior to becoming the incarnate forms that make them famous onscreen, the Telugu actors I have selected for my thesis analysis come from notable backgrounds. Their fame is

¹³ Žižek 2006.

¹⁴ Kusuma 2018.

¹⁵ This is addressed below.

linked to familial success in the Telugu film industry of yesteryear. Conversely, figures like NTR and his contemporaries Krishna and Savitri rose on their own. Despite the family connections that won my subjects places in center stage, their personal talent won them their own fans' support. While nepotism is not the only path to success in the industry, the fact that secondary casts are recycled almost to a comic degree makes new faces conspicuous.

Although I draw attention to these origin stories, my intent is not to belittle Tollywood stars for using their connections to win the limelight, because those who have become great successes won the favor of the fans on their own. Thus, the word 'nepotism' in this context carries too much negative weight for what I would prefer to categorize as a notable aspect of Telugu entertainment, and it brings enjoyability with the bonds of family. This only enhances the connotations of family-friendly, reliable heroism so pertinent to this paper. There are examples of fondness for a "family business" in Telugu cinema, wherein multiple generations of actors are cast in familial roles together,¹⁶ or as with actor Balakrishna playing his father NTR in a Telugu biopic on the deceased hero.¹⁷

The acting professions made by family ties extends my theory—heroes take care of their families, and as shown, the Telugu film industry is dynastic. For example, beyond generational nepotism (Krishna and Mahesh Babu), there is also the bond of brothers (Chiranjeevi and Pawan Kalyan) and cousins (Ram Charan Teja¹⁸ and Allu Arjun). In that way, the Telugu film hero does not ride off into the sunset released of his duty but rather reigns as protector, guide, and benefactor for his people. The heroes covered in my analysis below all attend to the needs of their families and communities.

¹⁶ Kumar 2014.

¹⁷ Jagarlamudi 2019.

¹⁸ Ram Charan plays the lead in another topically relevant film called *Rangasthalam* ('Stage') (Sukumar 2018), directed by the same director as in *Pushpa: The Rise*.

Extending beyond the “family man” values, they present appealing images of Telugu patriots “worthy” of emulation. A number of these heroes’ films recount stories pertinent to political society and strife experienced by the disadvantaged classes. The lead actors from *Indra* and *Jalsa*—biological brothers Chiranjeevi and Pawan Kalyan who are some of the biggest names in the Telugu film industry from as early as the 1980s—are actively involved in electoral politics and have served in Andhra Pradesh state government. For instance, Pawan Kalyan is the founder and president of the Jana Sena Party (JSP), a Hindu-centric political movement based in the Telugu states, with the populist mission to serve each individual and advocates for youth interests. And Chiranjeevi vainly ran for election as CM of Andhra Pradesh in the late 2000s and early 2010s,¹⁹ inevitably serving in a minor role in state government. These examples fall in line with the opening story of Mahesh Babu adopting villages in rural parts of the two states. They also resemble actions taken by their onscreen hero counterparts in more than one instance. Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* sees the line of recorded history (from before the time of history) as bringing into sharper relief the lives of heroes, thus humanizing them and binding them to earth: “The heroes become less and less fabulous, until at last, in the final stages of the various local traditions, legend opens into the common daylight of recorded time.”²⁰ This sums up my perception of Chiranjeevi, Pawan Kalyan, and Mahesh Babu translating offscreen what they found themselves capable of doing onscreen—the vanishing point between the image and reality finds them at their weakest, but they proceeded to take up tasks of equally epic proportion.

II. Quality Heroes

¹⁹ Rajamani 2017.

²⁰ Campbell 2008, page 271.

I argue that a Telugu film hero is defined by potent characteristics, including unquestionable virtue and righteous authority. The hero is omniscient to the needs of “his” people, and off screen, the actor resembles the heroism of his greatest film roles. And these qualities are supposedly reflected in those actors when they assume roles of greater involvement in public affairs. Fan associations perpetrate the publicity of the hero’s image offscreen and the actor can transition somewhat seamlessly into a kind of public authority that he otherwise would have only onscreen.²¹ In a way, his film role is seen as the training and credibility he required to become a suitable public authority, and in some cases an elected official. The concept is that if he can go through those motions and say those words onscreen, while instilling sincerity, he can succeed in public affairs. As students of political philosophy and social phenomena, we care about understanding the Telugu hero given the political precedent from NTR and Chiranjeevi with mobilizing people through their filmic heroism. So, what are these next generation heroes capable of? What do their onscreen qualities show about the evolution of heroism through the filter called ‘enacting social mobility’? These questions motivate my analysis, which encourages a bringing together of Telugu pride with the ‘film-turned-political hero’ image, using my interpretation from select films. This responds to my question of what form does “hero” take in Telugu film, while also addressing the significance of viewership, realistic politics versus peoples’ desires, and social mobilization.

This convergence of heroes’ film and public/political lives lead to unique characterizations of the nature of a hero. While the popular storyline of “mass” Telugu films uses a hero-centric narrative, there are particular actors who embody this above the commonplace. Certain stars, due to a combination of that dynastic family legacy in the Telugu film industry,

²¹ Nakassis 2023.

talent or source of appeal from dance skills, good looks, elocution, and the ability to embody the ideal hero on the screen, rise above the others. Those exceptions are the subject of this paper. A figure like Chiranjeevi, actor and former politician, mobilizes intense populist sentiment in his fans through his films, particularly *Indra* (discussed at length below) and *Tagore*.²² The Telugu states possess a legacy of increasingly populist political movements and ideologies, mobilized by NTR in the early 1980s when he founded the TDP. He was the epitome of a hero actor onscreen who retained his heroic status when he stepped offscreen and into the political arena. He has come to represent an aspirational figure for Telugu film-turned-political heroes henceforth. This legacy has been carried through the decades to the present day with continued support of the TDP by actors and politicians alike.

An inherent quality of the Telugu elan is produced in the hero's depiction on screen. Telugu films spend a lot of screen time celebrating the essence of the heroes; this is achieved through slow-motion fight scenes and epic entrances throughout the film.²³ Nakassis takes up the task of articulating the hero's metaphysical relationship with the film itself: "...this film is a spectacle, a spectacle of *him*. The opening scene turns on the hero-star's "entry," not simply his specular revelation on the screen but his spectacular perforation of the theatre's fourth wall" (46). The four films that I discuss here contain this kind of novelty-entrance, as well. It is so ubiquitous, there is even the thrilling anticipation every time a new film starts, for the buildup to when the hero is revealed. That "first look" does a lot of heavy lifting for preparing the viewers for the overall demeanor or personality of the hero for the playback of the film. It is also done by the evolution of the hero's relationships with secondary characters through the narrative. Generally, when there are differences (bad blood) between the hero and another character, the

²² Vinayak 2003

²³ Nakassis 2023.

other character is the person who adjusts their attitude and perspective, not the hero. This is thoroughly pervasive. This dynamic feeds into the hero's all-knowing powers, his godlike intellect, and his moral authority.

Fan associations become real-life lobbyists for their heroes, advocating for certain production choices like which heroine actress should play opposite the lead and evoking extreme emotional investment from fans.²⁴ This ranges from staging fireworks and borderline prayer services outside theaters to organizing publicity events. Moreover, fan associations publish propaganda-style ads and fliers in support of their film heroes. One such 'fourth-wall-breaking' example can be seen in the background of a scene in *Oohalu Gusagusalade* (transl. Imaginations Whispered).²⁵



Figure 1. This still from the film *Oohalu Gusagusalade* shows the fan association banner for Telugu actor Pawan Kalyan in the background (time stamp 16:50).

²⁴ Kusuma 2018, 94.

²⁵ Avasarala 2014.



Figure 2. (detail) The banner reads 'Power Star Pawan Kalyan - The TREND SETTER | Pawan Kalyan Youth Association Fans, Vizag | Shiva Nag'. The banner also advertises Kalyan's film *Jalsa* (2008), discussed below.

Fan associations foster an ideal image around their heroes of choice, sufficiently validated by his representation onscreen. For example, prominent phenomena in Telugu films include themes of hero-worship, larger-than-life characters and events, and the outcome that the hero always (*always*) wins. There is rarely the montage of 'hero breaks down only to overcome his own weaknesses.' Instead, the climax in the story is often built by the villain becoming more villainous (e.g., by forcing people into debt-bondage in addition to seizing land for an environment-annihilating pipeline that would earn him millions). Intermixed with the phenomena mentioned above is the theme of *magathanam* ("manliness" or "chivalry"). The word is symbolically used in a Telugu film starring the lead from *Pokiri*, below. In a grand contortionist act of dialogue, *magathanam* was used in a script to idolize the lead actor, the character he portrayed, *and* his real-life father (also a revered actor) in a character *he* portrayed

decades earlier.²⁶ Is it surprising to learn that this incarnation of *magathanam* is the same person who adopted those villages mentioned at the beginning?

Srinivas (2006) states outright that Telugu film stars care about and matter to social mobilization, and they have done so for a long time (29). This influence is exacerbated by fan associations, comprised of enterprising young men who are out to be heroes for their heroes. The leading original stars (NTR, and his contemporary ANR) stood on linguistic ground as the emblems for their linguistic communities (29). This worshipping of emblems is seen in a fever pitch in movies like *Indra* where Chiranjeevi is seen sailing on a sea of fans when he returns to Rayalaseema, a district in southern AP (31). Stars become representatives of their fans, through linguistic representation, says Madhava Prasad on South Indian “cine-politics”: “...in the mythological film, the star’s authority was a direct consequence of the role he played (as god he could perform superhuman tasks and also *speak* with authority), the social had to create a framework in which the figure of authority could be anchored” (34). As Srinivas describes, the star’s “nativity” affects the authority a star can have on/offscreen (35). This comes from not only speaking Telugu but also *being* Telugu. Fame can be used as a source of legitimacy for mobilizing political/social ideas. This builds on my focus of bringing in the viewership role in this analytical construction.

These elements of hero-worship and an increasingly fuzzy line between ‘real person’ (offscreen reality) and ‘character’ (onscreen image) are not new to the everyman’s relationship to films. As viewers, we might even want to believe (naturally knowing otherwise) that those on the screen are capable of bringing order to bureaucratic disasters within hours, saving the country from decades-ingrained social evils, and overpowering tens of goons. These are universal

²⁶ Ravipudi 2020.

sentiments. Psychoanalyst and film philosopher Slavoj Žižek addresses this in his writings and recordings: “Our desires are artificial. We have to be taught to desire. Cinema is the ultimate [inaudible] art. It doesn’t give you what you desire; it tells you how to desire.”²⁷ Film’s presentation and representation feeds this teaching to desire—the curated filmic image presents itself, leaving us to decide how to engage with it. What I hope to achieve through my discussion of select films is to discover how Telugu cinema presents this heroism and how this phenomenon sometimes becomes reality.

Method

My thesis explores the way Telugu films offer insight into the nature of heroism as both filmic and political power. Thus, I will discuss Telugu films that depict exceptional heroism onscreen and whose leads also represent heroism offscreen. I will engage with commentary and blogs that discuss Telugu heroism, particularly from historical and some class-oriented perspectives. In some cases, I will inspect stills from films or offer closer analysis and address other production details such as acknowledgements at the beginning of the credits. This will draw into my discussion the topic of casting actors based on film industry family ties that exist in real life. At times, I will also integrate messaging from the personal websites of actors who have foundations or lead political movements. As will become evident, the heroes I discuss are only male. There are few exceptions in this regard across the spectrum of Telugu hero films. Thus I will predominately focus on films with male heroes, but I will address ways in which heroines sometimes hold direct influence over the actions of heroes. This is not to belittle the significance of female leads and their own forays into political life, but the dearth of examples in the Telugu world leads me to focus on the majority of sources available. And although I reference many

²⁷ Žižek 2006.

films, I will be closely analyzing four selected for the purpose of interpreting the nature of the Telugu film hero. They each contain a different eminent lead actor, and these films are some of their most iconic roles. I chose films that won notoriety as classics and have experienced great popularity since their releases. They aptly capture the Telugu cultural fascination with heroism.

Since I am attempting to define the Telugu film hero, I need to see the hero, make sense of his persona, then identify ways he mobilizes others and himself. Other writers on this subject have spent as much time discussing groups of films for analysis in the way I have. I want to extract an array of characteristics for the groundwork of later scholarship. Within the films themselves, there is also the potential for the villains' *modi operandi* to bear on the heroes' legitimacy. This is a notable dynamic and one that I hope to touch on in the respective film analyses.

Analysis: In Conversation with Telugu Cinema

The Telugu-language movies contained herein include *Indra*,²⁸ *Pokiri*,²⁹ *Jalsa*³⁰, and *Pushpa: The Rise*³¹—all heralding leads with some of the biggest names in Telugu cinema. They showcase gritty yet responsible heroes who beat all odds (sometimes subverting officials and the law despite representing legal authorities themselves) to serve those who depend on them. The storylines show the possibilities of heroic images and realities and how they could bear on social and political injustices both on and off the screen. This image-rendering is important to help me uncover what these realities can mean for the nature of the hero and his lasting characteristics.

*Indra*³²

²⁸ Gopal 2002

²⁹ Jagannadh 2006

³⁰ Srinivas 2008

³¹ Sukumar 2021

³² Gopal 2002.

The story of *Indra* follows an age-old family feud in Rayalaseema, AP, heightened to a fever pitch when the son of one family weds the daughter of the other, at the behest of a peace-seeking local policeman. The daughter poisons her new husband in the marriage bedroom on the night of their wedding. The feud affects the geographical region dominated by the powerful families. From the poisoning, the new husband and his brother both die, leaving their family without a male elder. This loss irrevocably shaped the authority structure of Indra's family. After the murder of the brothers goes public, the schoolboy Indrasena Reddy steps up epically to replace them, becoming the unquestioned inheritor of the family's fortune, good or ill. He has a coronation-type induction by his grandmother to the family "throne" while still dressed in his school uniform. Onscreen, the sight and name of Indra also invoke a title instrumental piece filling the viewers with urgency, legitimacy, and that same reverence. Indra's heroism is self-assured and innate, activating in childhood. He becomes the hero without prior training, education, or role model. The strong elder figures of his family could imbue him with that personality, but he brings more than mere personality to the political battlefield of his region.

The story cuts to many years later, with the 'megastar' actor Chiranjeevi conducting a ritualistic dip in the Ganges River in Varanasi (north India). Simultaneously, the purported heroine of the film does the same upstream. They are unwittingly united metaphysically when a pearl chain that hung at her neck floats off while she is underwater and comes to rest on his shoulders when he emerges again. This religious interlude is closely followed by a sung litany to the deity Siva, whose famous temple occupies Varanasi. After his devotion in the river, Chiranjeevi as the lead character Sankarnarayana becomes the de facto leader of the riverside dance scene. Early connection to gods indicates virtue in the character, as if he prizes piety and justice.

In that same day, a real-life top Indian playback singer, S.P. Balasubramanian (SPB), playing himself on his own ritualistic obeisance to the Ganges, is befriended by Sankarnarayana, who we learn makes a living as a taxi driver in Varanasi. During a water taxi tour, Sankarnarayana tells SPB about the history of the place and different ways respect can be shown to the divinity of the water. Overcome by gratitude, SPB says “I don’t feel like I am talking to a taxi driver. I feel like Lord Krishna, Charioteer of Arjuna, is talking to me” (31:29).³³ From this statement there is the added umph to Sankarnarayana’s character for SPB to praise him in that way, further bridging the image of Chiranjeevi the hero with the reality of Chiranjeevi the actor.

Sankarnarayana demurs politely, denying the honor. This humility is proper and desirable for him as the idyllic hero. And his denial does nothing to minimize his power or authority, because we remember that he just finished leading the song and dance number to deity Siva that shook the banks of the Ganges. He has already demonstrated his ability to lead, his devotion to god, and his generosity of spirit for instructing his household and taxi patrons alike on the affairs of life. From this representation, we see that the hero of humble background is still aware of his cultural setting and wields a delicacy appropriate for rubbing elbows with film industry icons. This scene shows Sankarnarayana exhibiting key characteristics of ‘the hero’—importantly, the hero’s virtues dispose him to public service, not privacy. And most importantly, he has just been likened to god.

³³ This reference is to the greatest epic of ancient Hindu poetry, the *Mahabharata*. This text contains the Bhagavad Gita, one of the most direct law-giving philosophies defining Hinduism—this interlude is narrated by Krishna to Arjuna the day before a fierce battle, in answer to Arjuna’s question on how the violence and death of battle can be permissible for religious people. In the epic, Arjuna is a preeminent warrior, and deity Krishna has assumed the role of chariot-driver for the course of the battle. Keeping the significance of this scene in mind, this compliment made by SPB carries potent gentility and indicates extreme regard for Sankarnarayana’s character. Deity Krishna is alternatively known as Sri Venkateshwara, who is beloved in Andhra Pradesh, given his temple in Tirupati.

Through the continuation of the story, the heroine discovers the new resting place of her pearl chain and falls in love with Sankarnarayana because she believes that he has been chosen for her by god due to the religious circumstances under which the chain transfer took place. So, she begins to deliberately seek him out. When pretending to need a taxi, she brushes off a different driver by saying that he looks like a bill collector but that she is looking for a Bill Clinton (38:21). Sankarnarayana as the hero is desirable in virtue and good looks. Yet his quality of being accessible to the people who seek him is also critical to his image as a hero. This quality will resurface more clearly later in the film. For now, let it suffice to say that the heroine represents the love of the masses for Sankarnarayana through her own affection for him, an act she can perform due to his accessibility.

Sankarnarayana's virtuousness acts as the building blocks for his legitimacy as a hero. Benevolent authority is key; it provides an umbrella over people who are struggling to get by, whether with food security, quality education, or health—the fight for these human needs is alleviated when the hero's authority weighs in with his money or social connections, whichever the case may be. In comparison to him, every other character is victim to some kind of imperfection. As it is, the heroine demonstrates impatience by seeking out Sankarnarayana through unconventional means (and a lie). Another Telugu family on pilgrimage to Varanasi is careless, being fooled by thieves dressed as car and water taxi drivers and as a Hindu priest. And the niece of Sankarnarayana is imprudent in her studies and her choice of husband. In comparison, Sankarnarayana protects all of them from the consequences of their deeds. When the nephew of Sankarnarayana is accused of stalking a Muslim girl and is almost beaten for it, Sankarnarayana steps in to take the beating as his apparently bad role model. Nevertheless, he rightly suspects that the Muslim girl is too fearful to tell her father the truth about his nephew.

After the beating is through, he speaks out against cultural anger toward inter-religious marriages and later praises the Muslim father for listening to his daughter's marriage wish, saying there would be no more communal clashes. Once again, the hero's benevolent authority weighs in to protect victims while also advancing a social agenda. Sankarnarayana wins hearts by this act and the accuracy of his accusations against the girl's father.

Later, it is revealed that the heroine went missing from her university hostel since she coerced her way into Sankarnarayana's house to be closer to him, and her father, a Telugu politician serving in Varanasi, besieges the house until he sees whose house it really is. At this moment, we do not know why her father's rage is soothed; we can only observe that he is overwhelmed by gratitude: "I thought my daughter was in Varanasi. I've come to know just now she's with Varanasi's Viswanath himself," referring to Sankarnarayana (1:22:26). This is the second time Chiranjeevi's character has been referred to as a deity.

Even with a seemingly insurmountable set back at the interval (intermission), Sankarnarayana faces no true threat to his legitimacy as the hero. This is exactly the legitimacy onscreen heroes can leverage in the realm of offscreen mobilization. Chiranjeevi's fans have seen him go through the motions and live up to his reintroduction in *Indra*; what is stopping him from living out those realities offscreen? At this time, a side character speaks out on Sankarnarayana's true identity, reintroducing him as the one and only Indrasena Reddy whom we met as a schoolboy at the start of the film: "The name that brings cheer to people of Rayalaseema, the name that brings rain in drought-hit region, the name that turns barren lands into farms, the name that sends shivers down the spine of his enemies, that man, Indrasena Reddy..." (1:29:23).

Each invocation of his name is a direct reference to scenes in the film which follow shortly after this reintroduction, by means of a flashback. During a puja that Indra was conducting for rain to come to Rayalaseema (the region in southern Andhra Pradesh), the feuding family arrives to interrupt the proceedings. The presiding priest assures Indra that it is no sin to suspend the ritual momentarily because deity Ram did the same to kill a demon, as told in the *Ramayana* (another ancient Hindu epic). This is the third comparison of Indra to a deity. As the hero, Indra kills the “demon” elder from the feuding family, rain clouds form over the puja ritual’s icons of deity Venkateshwara’s discus and conch. This scene resembles a similar rain shower to a drought-stricken village in the Hindi historical drama *Lagaan*, in both setting (dusty earth in the village) and soundtrack (Telugu title: *Ghallu Ghallu*; Hindi title: *Ghanan Ghanan*; both onomatopoeia for thundering clouds). Ironically, this song in *Indra* is sung by SPB, who we know has a cameo in the film. Remarkably, heroes have power even when it is not given to them—they are likened to gods who it is believed also possess power even when it is not recognized or accepted. Additionally, Telugu heroes kill when killing is needed, so violence is a solution, despite the otherwise peace-loving image they represent.

The populism of the rain scene exemplifies the dependence the people of Rayalaseema feel on Indra as a benevolent and powerful family leader. In essence, he prays on behalf of the people as if he is a more suitable interlocutor with god, although his modesty would never betray such an implication; he is needed for their lives to proceed and thrive—but all of his good deeds are marked by genuine humility and righteousness. He cannot even hold himself back from helping the people of his village, least of all the son of the feuding family elder who tripped in the road and was nearly hit by a distracted truck driver. The elder, Veerashankar Reddy, cannot tolerate the “humiliation” of being helped by Indra and kills his own son, revoking what he

thinks is a debt. Indra, overwhelmed by anger and sorrow for the boy's mother, ostentatiously buries the son under the stones of the footpath leading to Veerashankar's house, planting above the boy a holy basil plant for the mother to nurture in lieu of her son. Indra's strongman authority enforcing what is right in society by publicly admonishing Veerashankar endears him more fervently in the hearts of the onlookers, who unquestionably side with Indra's household in the matter of the feud. Until this point, there has not been much pressure for us viewers to ask why Indra and not Veerashankar is the hero. Veerashankar's villainy is spoon-fed through his treatment of his son; this is emotionally reinforced by the musical score and the reactions of his family. But the crowd that gathers unquestionably supports Indra. Indra's prowess/authority is only put to the test later, when he uses it for social good in contrast to Veerashankar's family who demands recompense. This shows the crowd/public plainly which of the men is their hero. As such, Indra is a hero to the people, not to the system. He overcomes the limitations placed on common people to achieve uncommon outcomes for them. He has already brought them rain. Next, he will outfit them with the "freedom" of industry, through a water reservoir.

Still in the flashback, direct attraction comes to Indra when the sister of Veerashankar, Snehalatha Reddy, comes to his house and tells him everything she likes about him, after proposing marriage to him. She is introduced as a second love interest and heroine. In one particular shot, he is seen smirking at the compliments, an intimate instance of us seeing his own personal delight (since he is usually serving others or acting as lord) (1:57:21). This endears Indra to viewers further for his likeness to the deity Krishna, a mischievous, playful god who also expends his limitless resources for the wellbeing of his people. The close camera angle imbues the viewer with a sense of privacy, for although we know there are other people in the room, it is so close that we guess they cannot see his expression. This is relevant because his

family members want him to marry, but he feels too much duty to the village, so he would not want to betray any feelings to his family or villagers that might signal retreat from public service. As the story plays out, it becomes evident why his continued service is critical for his region's vitality.

Ever the public servant, when he overhears a household laborer muttering about the loss of water in the village, he jumps into action with the local government to obtain approval for water reservoir. This motion preempts the greatest personal and family sacrifice he must make, relinquishing his house and property for the sake of the reservoir, alongside the demand to marry Sneha. These conditions come for utilizing land for the reservoir, which was owned by Veerashankar Reddy and his brothers. When the crowd watching the negotiation erupts in indignation at the conditions, Indra commands them to remain silent and resume their seats. His is acting in their best long-term interests, but when they see that it will cost their region his contented life, they consider the water reservoir as a greater evil. Cut to the construction of the reservoir, and Indra is seen physically excavating the land for water, symbolically as god sends water from the sky. The *Ghallu Ghallu* soundtrack from the puja is reprised for this scene. Subsequently, while attending the engagement ceremony for Indra and Sneha at Veerashankar's house, Indra and his family are disrespected by being forced to sit on the floor instead of chairs. Comedic actor Sunil, in the role of a loafer of the feuding family, says aside while watching the interaction, "I feel it's like god visiting a devil's house" (2:17:02). This is the fourth comparison of Indra to god in the film. This comparison between god and devil drives home the villainy of Veerashankar, who cheaply goads his pride and sense of importance. However, more than bringing into relief the distinction from Indra as hero, it nudges at the childishness of

Veerashankar's motives. It is a child's unimaginative anger that makes him seat his enemies on the floor. But it is the enlightenment of the hero to not mind where he sits.

The story snaps back to the present day, and the drama of the climax ensues as the film comes to a close. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Indra, his niece and nephew, and their household are required to leave Varanasi and return to Rayalaseema. As argued by Rajamani (109), a particular shot demonstrates the mass power of Indra (and the inferred mass attraction of Chiranjeevi) as he is transported through the Rayalaseema village engulfed by a cloud of villagers to celebrate his return (2:37:27).



Figure 3. Chiranjeevi (circled) as Indra is standing in a vehicle during his "reinstatement" in Rayalaseema.

After wiping out all but 1-2 of the brothers, Indra stops before killing Veerashankar. To a crowd that formed during the fight, he proclaims an end to the feud, proclaiming that their families must be safe. He invokes all to keep no weapons and prays that only rain will wet the earth, not blood. Although he needs no crowd to preach and to possess power as a hero, this image is what he must be before the people. He serves them assurance in their ways of life, for safety and health.

The film closes with Indra's open embrace of his village which asks him to never leave. A banner saying 'Indra: Born for the People' in English fades out and the film ends. Fittingly, Indra's name calls to mind the deity Indra, who is believed to be the king of the gods; taking Rayalaseema as his kingdom, it is no wonder he managed to overcome the villainy of Veerashankar with the intrinsic invocation of his namesake.

Pokiri ("Hooligan")³⁴

An angsty young man named Pandu moves in an out of gangs and has no loyalty, with only his reputation as a skilled gangster to protect his name. The first shot of Pandu is of him leaping through the air through chilis, citrons, peppers, and gourds (an overturned farmer's cart) while being hotly pursued by other rowdies. His prowess as a fighter and a strategist is demonstrated when he leads them to a trap, overpowers them alone, and later joins their gang. This scene is closely followed by a song and dance sequence warning of his decisive anger when irked, with a brief interlude in honor of Ganesh, a deity with the power to remove obstacles. Already, viewers have the impression that an unpredictable but principled gang member with *magathanam* is ambitious, but one who earn accomplishments thanks to determination and the deity Ganesh's intervention.

Pandu lives out his personal commitment to have no loyalty, and it has a strong effect on his relationship with the don of his new gang, Ali Bhai. If loyalty is an important element of gang rapport, then Pandu has set himself apart, proving his trustworthiness in other ways. From the time that he is initiated into the new gang, there is no clear reason for his worth other than his fearlessness at beating up the rowdies in their own territory. This combination of ruthlessness and luck makes him a core component of this new group seemingly by sheer impressiveness.

³⁴ Jagannadh 2006.

Throughout the film, whether Pandu is lounging with other rowdies—a conspicuous pastime in Telugu cinema and culture³⁵—or aiding the gang’s land-grabbing, rent-seeking schemes, he doesn’t resort to showmanship but rather acts decisively and does only what he was paid to do. As a character who is rewarded for jobs well done but also one who personally knows the social costs of apparent aimlessness, as will be discussed shortly, Pandu is both a relatable person and someone worthy of emulating.

The novelty of Pandu piques the interest of the don, Ali Bhai. In the first few moments of their meeting, Pandu blatantly ignores the evident convention of paying homage to the don and instead flops down in a chair opposite to him. Curiously, rather than becoming angry, Ali Bhai engages Pandu in conversation, almost as equals. This time, Pandu’s ruthlessness is rewarded once again. The relationship between Pandu and Ali Bhai is not revisited until the end of the film, due to an intervening extrajudicial arrest of Ali Bhai by a fierce policeman and Pandu’s distraction with a girl.

While Pandu is berating his friend for wanting a girlfriend, he catches sight of “the girl” (Shruti) and goes speechless. He vainly resists staring at her and breaks off his sentence. Shruti, alternatively, sees him as a creep until later, when he protects her from another policeman who is using his official authority to intimidate her while seeking sexual favors from her. The dynamic between Pandu and Shruti is endearing but unsure for the remainder of the film because she wants a good man, and he kills people for a living. But with the pressure of the policeman rising as he threatens her, her mother, and her brother in their home, she resolves to accept Pandu as he is. Pandu’s feelings for Shruti prevent him from caring for her openly, since he knows the consequences for her life if he did so, as a gangster. Pandu does not exhibit long-term virtue that

³⁵ Jeffrey and Young 2014

we expect to see in heroes, although he is evidently capable of sacrificing his own preferences for her needs. This *is* an heroic characteristic. This would cause Shruti to second guess seeing him as a viable suitor given the social setbacks her family faces. What Pandu offers her that the irreverent policeman and another suitor don't is physical protection from those threats. But his presence brings its own threats, as shown next.

Tangentially, these two policemen are secondary characters, but they represent caricatures of universal pitfalls in the public authority that comes with law enforcement. They have different ranks and moral standards from one another: one is principled but rash and the other uses his public authority for one-off personal indulgences. As is the case when law enforcement abuses its authority, victims have no recourse to higher protection; and in the case of AP/TS, *Pokiri* exemplified this issue of administrative and bureaucratic hoops through a trip to the emergency room. In that scene, Pandu shows his ruthlessness again by exaggerating these bureaucratic hoops when Shruti gets wounded as a bystander to a street fight. The doctor refuses to give her treatment until she and Pandu file a complaint with the police, which Pandu refuses to do. To make a point, Pandu cuts the doctor as well, forcing him to personally acknowledge the ineffectiveness that crept into the system. Naturally, the doctor calls for help, but Pandu flippantly says to file a case with the police first. In doing so, Pandu articulates how the justice of the street supersedes the power of the state, thereby demonstrating his largess and righteousness as a hero. (Remember, as in *Indra*, the hero is a means for the people to overcome the foibles of the system, since they cannot accomplish this on their own. Through his reaction, Pandu reinforces the frustrations of the system endemic to the procedures of bureaucracy.)

During this interlude at the hospital, Shruti asks Pandu directly what he does for a living. When he asks her to say what she thinks he does, she chalks up the familiar condition of an

educated man in search of employment (Jeffrey and Young 2014). But when he scoffs, she is forced to quickly acknowledge he is a “*pokiri*,” a hooligan, to protect his pride, for there is no pride in idling time in unemployment, for honor comes in activity and occupation. If Pandu is a loafer, he cannot possess the characteristics and air of a hero. As a hooligan, he can exist in his own simulation of heroism—this touches on a deeply self-referential dynamic in this thesis, that Pandu has defined what a hero means to himself and has set out to live accordingly. But as an otherwise jobless hooligan, he must be relegated to the category of unemployed youth in search of meaning and honor, as set forth by Jeffrey and Young (2014). Pandu is a hero for the purpose of my thesis, but he is a subject of *jugaad* for Jeffrey and Young. And in turn, the research of those scholars was inspiration for this thesis, due to the growing number of youth in India seeking meaningful occupation. So how can I claim that Pandu is a hero?

It is not until the last ten minutes of the film that a series of deaths—namely those of a third retired policeman and his son—that Pandu’s true identity and mission are revealed. At that moment, the righteous *magathanam* of Pandu comes through and the tentative virtuousness he represented throughout the film is realized. The following line from the end of the film has been replicated and parodied, for it is a potent expression. Pandu says this when he makes a report over the phone about the outcome of a fight, saying that the man standing behind him was already dead. Thus, when he cut the call, he turned around and made his report a reality.

“*Okkasari commit aithe naa maata nene vinanu.*” (2:42:17)

(“Once I commit, I won’t listen to my own word.”)

Pandu’s conviction is one of the strongest elements of the film. He spearheads the story arc by his unusual character as a gangster. Additionally, in the grand scheme of the story, the don Ali Bhai only brings existential threats to those who act against him in his land-grabbing, rent-

seeking business. He is not an archvillain, for any intents and purposes. But terminating his slippery existence was the object of Pandu's concealed mission. And although *Pokiri* is a rather innocent film in general, its popularity matched with excellent storytelling makes it one of the best of a series of films that the lead actor does with similar narratives. Always, when redemption comes, so does the success of his mission, and he never disappoints. This is the culminating mark of a hero.

Jalsa ("Fun")³⁶

The character presentation of Sanjay in *Jalsa* is as simple and familiar as if he were family. In fact, he is so down to earth, it is curious to apply the title of hero to him at all. Straight away, we see him as fun-loving, possessing many degrees at the master's level, and loving a girl whose father dislikes him. He is thus an unusual hero, not seeming to serve the masses so much as those in his immediate vicinity. He is also religious, comically seeking mercy from deity Siva before meeting the love interest's father. In these ways, he seems a commonplace man with commonplace troubles. What is there for him to be heroic about? More than any of the other heroes, Sanjay represents the yearnings and troubles of the everyman. He does not come from money nor does he have much professional drive to become CEO, etc. Rather, he is somewhat unlucky in love and has his own bouts with disagreeable people. Sanjay has a simple philosophy to life and does not strive beyond his means. But this does not impede on his ambitions in his education and making his world a better place for his friends and family.

The film contains a memorable opening scene set in a dark parking lot with nameless men preying two young women, one of whom is evidently the heroine. The girls run from the threat of the men and rain begins to fall. From across the lot, a drunk Sanjay and his friend come

³⁶ Srinivas 2008.

out from a bar. The nameless men beat up Sanjay's friend, so Sanjay intervenes to provide his friend with casual fighting instructions, his drunkenness apparently reduced. His instructions boil down to only two things, the rod (weapon) and the head (target), "...Rod, head, rod, head" *whack* (12:08). Once they win the fight and the girls are safe, the two of them saunter off again, drunkenly singing.

As a perpetual student, Sanjay is able to cling to the liveliness of youth, dancing on the weekends, as the first song of the film celebrates. He lives in his uncle's house and is shown as a moocher and is someone who does not work around the household like the other inhabitants. He has strong opinions on the way women should dress and act, each judgement being passed on an individual basis. Once Sanjay and the heroine (soon-to-be love interest), Baaghu (seemingly a student at his college) are properly introduced, he claims he has a thesis on how women should act and why, asking Baaghu to come over in the evening if she wants to learn more. Thus, he is provocative and nobly discusses things that lack propriety. He is apparently immune from such censure because he is known to speak the truth, as he sees it, and his recommendations bring success to those who follow. For instance, he teaches Baaghu how to be a demure girl, like Sita (wife of Hindu deity Ram) or Parvathi (wife of Hindu deity Siva). Being full of advice, he tells her also to move out of her hostel to a safer neighborhood. Sanjay's bearing is casual and aloof and annoyed; for instance, he became irritated when Baaghu took advantage of his generosity without being fully honest and open about herself (in this case, she didn't wear her glasses due to societal beauty standards). He wants her to be her true self, for therein lies her beauty. By becoming full of "righteous" anger toward Baaghu over her lack of confidence in her own qualities, Sanjay presents a confusing and rather unpredictable ally. That is, although he is eager

for her to be comfortable in her own skin, he still becomes angry at her limitations. Thus, he lacks the recognizable qualities of a nurturing and sympathetic hero.

Sanjay becomes the object of the lead villain's private detective search but we don't yet know why. Based on the set up of the scene, we learn that the villain wants Sanjay to feel crippling vulnerability and fear. The villain thinks this is the ultimate challenge for Sanjay the hero, although we learn that this is not the case. There is always some greater personal trouble that he has overcome already.

Although Sanjay seems less heroic in this film than heroes elsewhere, he can still do anything he wants with no repercussions. When his uncle is nabbed and beaten up by local bullies, his fighting instinct is reactivated. Blood spurts from every goon at his strike. Thus, violence is a part of his life in a familiar way. After the fight and leading into the intermission, he then begins a rant about the struggles of life, ending on an existential soliloquy of knowing what it means to struggle, revealing he lost his parents within six hours of one another and the feeling of being compressed into a bottomless pit. (This fits into his character as an honest, open, and truthful hero.) At the moment of finishing his exegesis on struggles, he shouts in a fit of anger "Naxalite-nayanu! Naxalite-nayanu! Naxalite-nayanu!" ('I became a Naxalite!') (1:22:08).

Sanjay is beset with the troubles of life, but he resists the urge to let those troubles define him. In a flashback, we learn how he lost his brother and parents to early deaths and was inducted by the Naxals. With the same fury with which he ranted about struggle, we see he was overcome by the presence of a granite post demarcating the likely false boundary line of his village goons. Each time he returned from the cemetery upon cremating his parents, he hits his knee on the post. This overwhelms his fortitude and he duels with the post until he is able to lift it from the ground. In doing so, he attracts the attention of the goons, who he incapacitates.

While doing so, he shouts an accusation that neither their boss nor his father own the water, land, air, fire, or sky (1:28:53).

This is a callback to the second interview with Baaghu's father regarding his romantic interest in her, because as it happens, she is the younger sister of the earlier love interest. During the conversation, Sanjay, supposedly older and wiser than in the first meeting, stands up for himself and starts a momentary grandstand of naming the five elements, but then he walks away. The father asks what he meant by proclaiming the five elements before walking away, and he responds that usually someone can say something profound after naming the five elements but he was at a loss at that moment. We have seen that he is capable of being profound, so why does he hold himself back?

Returning to the flashback, a Wildman sees the anger in Sanjay. He says he would work well with those in the woods, the Naxals. Returning to the question of why Sanjay held himself back, we learn that Baaghu's father knew about Sanjay's stint in the Naxal group and thus has no faith in him or his judgement. They have an argument, man to man, of whose fault the war between police and Naxals is and how their personal lives are influenced by it. (N.B. The Naxalite movement is decades old, dating back to one of the moments of factionalism in the Communist Party of India. They are generally ostracized by society and live in the woods of AP/TS, and elsewhere. While they perpetuate violence against the organized police force and state governments *Jalsa* shows them as a gritty haven for youth who seek meaning in and solace from the harshness of life, as in the case of Sanjay. During this interlude, a song implies an intellectual tradition in Sanjay's Naxalite experience: (excerpts) "Does your conscience know you're its own enemy?" continuing "We've put on too many faces of chivalry, we've lost our own identity" (1:38:42).

The villain, named Damodar Reddy, who set the private detective on Sanjay earlier, is the father of the young man Sanjay fought in the dark parking lot in the opening scene. Upon learning that he is being targeted, Sanjay promises to give the father the ability to feel fear, which represents the culmination of many wrongs both of them feel have come from one another. As mentioned earlier, Damodar wants him to be vulnerable, and Sanjay wants him to feel fear. Consequently, what does fear have to do with undermining a hero? Pushpa experiences fear due to his lack of a surname. But somehow the ‘nobody Sanjay’ has no such weakness.

Sanjay’s heroism is more personal, localized. He reacts to protect from threats to family and loved ones, then the evil seeks him out further. But he demonstrates charisma and ecocentrism from being orphaned and through rehabilitation from his life as a Naxalite. He also knows kung fu and reads classical poetry. But he is equally relatable as a simple nephew in love with a girl. He follows a “live and let live” mentality, akin to the outlook of Indra.

Sanjay fights with Damodar for his life, stirring fear inside him. He humiliates him in front of his men. He brings him to the middle of a road and preaches his tactics of kidnapping the son he beat up in the opening scene. Upon concluding his revelation, he slams his sword into the road between Damodar’s legs, outstretched on the pavement. Damodar is left speechless, and he never regains that faculty. An alternative perspective might say that he even became enlightened. But from that moment on, Damodar is fixated on the sword handle protruding from the road, visiting that location every day. One day when he is mutely observing the handle, Sanjay walks by and mindlessly pushes it into the ground fully; Damodar dies on the spot. Sanjay thus defeats two pillars, one with grief from his parents’ deaths and the other with ease, not realizing what came from his action. This is an enigmatic victory unlike the other heroes who tie up the loose ends of their combats neatly. But Sanjay does not gloat in his victory, he does not even seem to

notice. For him, the victory came when Damodar experienced fear and remembered his humanity.

*Pushpa: The Rise*³⁷

The story of *Pushpa: The Rise* follows the manhood of Pushpa,³⁸ an Odyssean character who leads his own way of life, regardless of others' expectations. He is living near Rayalaseema, working in the logging and forestry industries as a day laborer. Without context in the opening scene, Pushpa is being transported by Tamil policemen through a rural area, when they ask he if he himself is Tamil. After he bribes them to let him free, he grunts back “*Pakka Telugu*” (“Hardcore Telugu”), indicating he comes from the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh. Since this is the first reveal of Pushpa the film hero, it brings with it anticipatory energy from the audience, followed by the satisfying beat drop of his self-identifying statement.

As Thota describes, the character of Pushpa is depicted with strong connotations represented by his body. In his village, he acts the respectful and doting son to his mother, pushing off the rent collector when he hassles her in public. Although she is a caring person herself, she berates Pushpa for his apparent listlessness and lack of employment after quitting his most recent day job. In doing so, she calls him a buffalo. In the next shot, Pushpa sells their family buffalo and pays the rent collector his full due. This comes as a touching transitional moment as Pushpa sells the productive farm animal to which he was compared derogatorily. Pushpa sees the value of the buffalo animal when his mother sees only the neediness of the man “buffalo” in her son. Ostensibly in his mother’s mind, there is now no “lazy” buffalo for comparison, so she has regained her son. But arguably for Pushpa, he has assumed the nature of the productive buffalo—this links back to Thota’s analysis of Pushpa’s manhood being tied

³⁷ Sukumar 2021.

³⁸ Thota 2022.

intimately to his body as a vessel. Although I don't intend to argue that for the remainder of the film Pushpa is like a buffalo, he has unmistakably shed conventional restrictions to comportment and personal drive. In the next scene, he chooses his next hourly job decisively, opting for the high-risk, high-reward occupation of red sandalwood logging. His first logging expedition starts with a devout prayer and an invocation to bless the loggers' axes. Through this devotion, we once again see a humility to Pushpa that is largely concealed for the duration of the film. This resembles Indra, when he receives the beating on behalf of his nephew. Although Pushpa does not take physical insult through prayer, he calls on god to protect his enterprise, which serves him well when he develops a quick plan to hide logs from concerned forest patrol officers.

Although from the outset we see Pushpa as the leader of his own destiny, there is one thing that can break his spirit. He was born as the illegitimate son of a benevolent village leader, but the other sons of the man never let Pushpa take their surname. In an impressionable scene from Pushpa's enrollment in primary school, the elder half-brother confronts the boy Pushpa and unforgettably asserts his namelessness. This reality plagues Pushpa throughout life and threatens to interfere in his desire to marry. Despite this deeply personal blow, Pushpa demonstrates that a hero does not require a full name.

Pushpa bypasses any public ridicule he receives for his nativity by essentially manifesting the life he would prefer to lead. Through his cunning at hiding a load of red sandalwood from the police, he earns 5 lakh rupees, a sizable sum for one day's cleverness. Upon informing his supervisors of where the load is concealed, though, they leave him and his lackey to find their own way out of the forest. Instead of walking out on his own, however, Pushpa declares that because he came into the woods in a car that he would leave in one too. Thus, his associate is obliged to go to town, buy the car, and return to pick up Pushpa. Because purchasing the car was

insufficient, Pushpa then parades his new car with his mother in the village center before the elder half-brother's house. Similar stunts propel him to the inner circle of his red sandalwood syndicate. When his is offered a "salaried position" in the syndicate, he reduces the salary by a modest fraction, much to the chagrin of his lackey. Pushpa explains that he would be in the pocket of the syndicate if he accepted the full salary. By taking a reduced amount, he considers himself a partner, announcing "Now, Kondareddy [syndicate leader] and we are Partners...Partner Pushpa here" (41:12).

Over time, he thoroughly earns his integration into the syndicate. His cleverness proved to be its greatest strength and brought immense profit. He was a hero by means of his intellect and acuity in subverting the police. But two people arise as obstacles to his peaceful enjoyment of life as a sandalwood smuggler. The first is Srivali, the pretty village girl whom Pushpa longed to give him just one look. Every time their paths crossed at the milk loading station, at the temple, and elsewhere, she seemed blind to his existence. He was becoming increasingly desperate for her to glance at him, saying that he would give her up (like sour grapes) if she didn't look at him on his last attempt. His lackey witnessed his desperation and paid Srivali to look at him just once, with a smile. This was the straw that broke the camel's back and Pushpa eagerly pursued her, seemingly without her consent, until his lack of a surname foiled their engagement ceremony. After that incident, Pushpa retreats, sensing resentment and censure from her family for his mother's marital status.

However, when a prominent brother of a syndicate leader harasses and demands Srivali to sleep with him for her father's safety, we learn just how devoted Srivali apparently was to Pushpa. In a touching scene before she leaves to earn her father's safety, she visits Pushpa and explains her entire demeanor toward him from the beginning, as well as her current situation.

Although he was still emotionally sore from the engagement ceremony, he was deeply moved by the sincerity of her explanation. This scene is one of profound reconciliation and promise. Through the lens of omniscient heroism, Pushpa as the hero exhibits patience with Srivali, trusting her vulnerability when she seeks help. This scene depicts a moment in a hero's life when he remembers his dependency on a close-knit support system as well as the opportunity for someone dependent on him to voice her particular needs directly to him. Consequently, Pushpa escorts Srivali to the brother's residence and, with her in his arm, breaks the body of the brother. This is similar to Indra, although Indra does not give the impression of needing the aid of anyone or anything. By my theory, in the context of Pushpa, the fuzzy line between hero and reality is even more faint. He still possesses the innate characteristics of a hero—all-knowing like god, powerful. But he is ever so slightly more human.

The runoff of this fight between Pushpa and the brother of the syndicate member comes at the cost of Pushpa's position as a partner within the syndicate. The syndicate member and his strongmen take Pushpa out to a remote logging ground, where Pushpa's suspicions of danger are confirmed. He is blindfolded, handcuffed, and thrown into a shallow grave. A timely crossfire between sandalwood logger factions saves Pushpa from that obscure death. During the fight scene, he combats with his captors while handcuffed and blindfolded, saying that he can see his future, as a living man (2:06:30). At this moment, it is hard to tell whose side Pushpa is on since he has been playing the logger factions against one another. When the politician covering up the loggers' illegal extraction comes to mediate between the factions after the fight, he demands civil discourse without death threats, at least while he is around. He itemizes the logistics: the syndicate needs to pay off multiple public services—a forest team, a revenue team, an ID team, the police—and it costs everyone for their cooperation. It is during this meeting that Pushpa is

“elected” as the new syndicate leader. There is no question in our minds on how deserving of that position Pushpa is, knowing his acuity as a smuggler. This new appointment makes his prowess official, but with the officialdom comes official censure, as shown in the next scene. This next scene breaks the heroic knees of what we imagined our hero Pushpa to be. Prior to the appointment, he essentially was so low socially that there were no knees to break.

The second person to rise as an obstacle to Pushpa peacefully living out his days as a red sandalwood baron is a young, new, local policeman named Shekavat. Shekavat is preoccupied with the concept of “brand” and hits Pushpa where it hurts, summoning his lack of a surname. To Shekavat, Pushpa has no brand name, which makes him less worthy as a person. However, it is unclear what Shekavat desires beyond power in the region. As such, we see that he is not afraid to go under the table to put Pushpa in his place. Pushpa undergoes a shocking transformation subsequently to meeting Shekavat. Although he is the syndicate head, he bows to Shekavat’s every request. The first of which is unforgettably voiced during their initial meeting, when Pushpa brings a bribe for Shekavat to permit their logging business as well as to invite him to his wedding. Shekavat threatens to jail Pushpa for three years, thus controlling when he gets married to Srivali. Shekavat repeats aggressively: “*Okati takoindi*” (“One short”) (2:35:48). Pushpa thinks that Shekavat is saying there is one less bill in the bribe package and must recount it in the police station. But the count is correct and Shekavat is still repeating “One short”. In that moment, Pushpa appears to become a smaller person, curling under the buffeting pressure of Shekavat’s perceived authority.

As it turns out, Shekavat wanted to wear Pushpa down into calling him “sir”. That one word was the “One short”. This apparent turn is a shock to our, the Telugu film viewer’s, system—so unexpected is it to see the hero buckle, at any time let alone to the villain. Is Pushpa

still the hero at this point? Was he ever truly the hero, seeing as how he lives and works as an outlaw? The suspense, disappointment, and doubt we feel at this time reminds us of the unwavering omniscience we expect in our heroes. When Pushpa appears to falter, that ideal heroic image begins to contort, threatening to become unrecognizable by our delineated characteristics. Furthermore, Pushpa's humiliation at the hands of his equal reminds us of the contrasting image of Pandu taking the liberty of not acknowledging the authority of his superior. Pushpa even appeared to be a "bigger deal" than Pandu. His decision in the police station to say "sir" was a means of self-preservation, so that he could leave the building instead of being incarcerated. But his continued smallness of mind and body, to return to Thota's theme, would indicate Pushpa's fundamental insecurity about his nativity. Moreover, if I were to return to the likeness of the buffalo from the beginning, he has entered a long recoil (retreat) in preparation for a monumental release (charge) that catches Shekavat unguarded. Pushpa the hero still exists, but he is dormant, as are his defining characteristics of heroism.³⁹

On a mountaintop on the night of Pushpa's wedding, shortly before the auspicious hour, Pushpa and Shekavat have a "picnic" beside a bonfire. Pushpa is still demonstrating his meek personality to Shekavat, who has become puffed with his perceived power. But in a turn of fortune, Pushpa takes a gun and places it to his own fist, a move Shekavat played on him earlier in their acquaintance. This action puts Shekavat immediately on edge, and a manic Pushpa fires the gun into his clenched hand. This of course releases a spring of blood, which he smacks on the back of his shirt collar, lionizing blood as the ultimate brand and one which none can take from him. He then strips to his shorts and forces the infuriated Shekavat to do the same, thus

³⁹ Hopefully an extended account of "where" the hero Pushpa went during this vulnerable time is provided in the sequel. His actions and posturing was largely unexplained by the end of this first installment, and there is the possibility that his smallness of character was yet another instance of his cunning.

representing the physical manifestation of having no brand, no stamp. Pushpa’s heroic demeanor returns as he says, “Everyone will feel the same when you strip them,” (2:48:27). There is then no difference between them as individuals. Pushpa foretells that people can recognize him even stripped, but no one, not even his dog, will know Shekavat without his uniform.

With Shekavat stuck in his stripped, vulnerable state on the hilltop, Pushpa makes a final barter with him per the red sandalwood syndicate. Pushpa states that no bribe money will go to Shekavat, only that he will be called “sir”. The film ends on a Sanskrit sloka that mentions “*pushpa*” in the first line—it chants that here, “*pushpa*” signifies “fire,” not “flower.” Just as our ideal heroic image of Pushpa lost its allure when he “bowed” to Shekavat in the police station, so was it rebuilt when Pushpa reasserted his heroism for us on the hilltop. This reassures us of his legitimacy as hero.

Final Thoughts

Thus, “...the tendency has always been to endow the hero with extraordinary powers from the moment of birth, or even the moment of conception. The whole hero-life is shown to have been a pageant of marvels with the great central adventure as a culmination” (274).⁴⁰ In essence, a hero is “chosen” from the moment of his genesis (conception, birth, age of reason, etc.). His being a hero is not a learned talent from the harshness or luxury of his upbringing. Rather, it is innate, coming from within. This is shown in the early scene of young Indra stepping up as master of the house when his father and his uncle are killed by the feuding family. And by Campbell’s reasoning, once the hero becomes a hero, he always remains thus. Taking Telugu actors’ film careers to be the “great central adventure” of the hero-life, we see a means of perpetuating their heroic characteristics indefinitely, if only through the eternal medium of film

⁴⁰ Campbell 2008.

recordings. As such, this affirms the theory I claim above, that the Telugu film hero retains his heroism in perpetuity. Thus, the theory answers my thesis question of ‘what form does “hero” take in Telugu cinema?’—the form of an everlasting, real-life hero, seemingly possessing the human faculties of the common man but in fact wielding the capacity of an all-virtuous, omniscient, benevolent, public authority.

Fundamentally, the thrill and attraction of a hero is the inspiration that we can become that way too. We know we would follow our hero and desire the assurance and validation that others would follow us in turn if we became like our hero(es). This is a circular logic that affirms our choice of hero is worthy and legitimate. Heroes, despite not requiring external validation, also demonstrate their legitimacy, with the consequence of showing why belief in them is good, while maintaining humility. This is seen particularly in *Indra*, *Pokiri*, and *Jalsa*. Indra gives up his lifestyle for his community to gain a water reservoir; Pandu tolerates the social ridicule of living as a hooligan to catch a criminal. Likewise, Sanjay prioritizes education and punches a few bullies to remind them about the expectations of our social contract. But Pushpa, nevertheless a hero, calls to mind more pertinent and perhaps urgent realities: that of powerful gang warfare and environmental damage.

In *Pushpa*, Telugu pride comes through strongly in the high quality of the protected red sandalwood, which is claimed to be available only in Andhra Pradesh. There are real-life red sandalwood smugglers who scrape a living doing what Pushpa exhibits so heroically.⁴¹ The concept of “mafia raj” draws from these examples of gang power that utilizes extralegal allowances to perpetuate their lucrative enterprises. The “mafia raj” bosses of South Asia have a larger than life-ness, but unlike actors whose characters are untouchable and omnipotent, the

⁴¹ Picherit 2019.

bosses are the dictators who cling to power anxiously.⁴² Politicians bandy the concept of “mafia raj” around as a means of mobilizing voters for certain political outcomes.⁴³ This troubling reality of social conflict and environmental damage is poetically captured in the story of *Pushpa*, appropriately heavily referenced in pop culture, including in other movies that have been made since its release. The image of Pushpa the man is taken as an emblem of masculine power and intellect, with the iconic rendering of his familiar chin rub with the back of his hand. This chin rub was even mimicked in the movie itself (2:28.55). This deep self-referencing of Pushpa intensifies his image and the memorability of him. Furthermore, it can glamorize his resemblance to “mafia raj” systems. The film contains a notable party scene in the middle of the story where it is explicitly says that smuggler factions, politicians, and coolies (low, common laborers) communed together (1:12:54). It is artful onscreen moments like these that capture the complexity of social dynamics and bring a glimpse of reality into dramatized narratives. And increasingly, the stories and characters of these films resemble the underdog outlaw hero so well depicted in *Pushpa*. The filmic “mafia raj” style has become adopted by the Telugu film industry, releasing films that rival Michelutti’s field research on gang members.⁴⁴

Popular films bring with them a staying power from pop culture references like these in *Pushpa*. One such is the production company graphic from Indra. It is a graphic of a spinning globe with the image of NTR as Krishna blowing a conch in profile: Vyjayanthi Movies (see Figure 3). Beyond commercial success and advertising, in some villages, NTR has become an image of the deities he represented onscreen—namely Ram and Krishna. In 2015, a statue of NTR as deity Krishna was raised on the roadside in Andhra Pradesh as an ode to his service as

⁴² Michelutti 2019.

⁴³ Seth 2023.

⁴⁴ Varma 2010.

CM.⁴⁵ A second statue has been in production, but the religious nationalist connotations of its image have delayed its establishment.⁴⁶ Likewise, as Rajamani reports, Chiranjeevi’s onscreen image drew immense crowds, saying “About 10,000 students and fans of the ‘Megastar’ came to the campus of the Sri Venkateshwara University in Tirupati on 31 August 2003 to participate in the making of the film [*Tagore*]” (109).



Figure 4. Image of production company for *Indra*: NTR dressed as deity Krishna (time stamp 0:29).

In sum, being a hero brings with it connotations of survival. The hero must remain a hero to retain his omniscience, and his dependents live well thanks to his authority and guidance. Sanjay rails against the containment and commercialization of the five elements of our atmosphere, implying social deterioration. Drinking water, the air we breathe, the fire that heats us and cooks our food all serve our life’s necessities and all come at a price. Pushpa drains the forests of red sandalwood for his mother and family to gain a respect in society they have never known. Likewise, we rely on these heroes to represent virtuous leaders we want to follow and remember.

⁴⁵ Correspondent from *The Hindu* 2015.

⁴⁶ Mutha 2023.

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