



Srinivas, S. V. *Politics as Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema.*

Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2013. Print.
[Hardback]. xxi + 431 pp.

Review by Parichay Patra

Doctoral Candidate, Monash University, Australia

S. V. Srinivas teaches Cultural Studies at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS) in Bangalore and is the coordinator of the Culture: Industries and Diversity in Asia (CIDASIA) research program at the centre. His research interests lie in star studies and popular industrial cultures. For more than a decade, he has published consistently on Telugu cinema,¹ including its stars, fan activities, its association with electoral politics and mass mobilization, its appropriation of East Asian martial arts cinema, and its responses to the various challenges posed by the sectarian politics ravaging Andhra Pradesh. Srinivas' research occupies a significant position in the existing literature on South Indian cinema and politics, and his methodology distinguishes his work from that of his predecessors in the field. While Indian Cinema Studies has almost always been dominated by works devoted to Bombay cinema as the national popular film industry, Srinivas' work brings relatively under-examined regional cinema(s) and its star-politicians to the fore.

Srinivas' new book appears at a time when the linguistic community called the 'Telugu' is at stake, *Vishalandhra* (greater Andhra Pradesh) is on the verge of extinction² and the

¹ Telugu film industry is one of the four major south Indian film industries and is located primarily in the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh. It is the second largest film industry in India (after Bollywood) and the state of Andhra Pradesh constitutes the single largest market for cinema in India. Moreover, the crossover of two generations of film stars into politics has attracted the attention of film scholars and social scientists alike.

² The popular demand for a separate state called Telangana has a long history. Since the formation of the state of Andhra Pradesh the movement for a separate state has been in vogue. Communist leaders like Sundarayya have published on the movement. Srinivas has shown how NTR resolved the crisis temporarily. Recently the Indian government made a public declaration concerning the formation of the new state, and thus the popular movement came to an end. The movement continues to exert a huge influence on the popular cultures of the region however; it has produced the folk songs of Gaddar, the revolutionary prose and verses of a number of insurgents, and a number of popular films as well.

formation of a new state called Telangana is in process. In *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N. T. Rama Rao* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), Srinivas expresses his hope that Telugu cinema will outlive both the tradition of cinema hall and the state of Andhra Pradesh. *Megastar* begins with a description of actor-turned-politician Chiranjeevi launching his *Praja Rajyam* party in 2008 in an extremely spectacular fashion at the temple city of Tirupathi, a sacred space that escapes the regional rivalries. *Megastar* spans three decades, and positions 1983 as a watershed year characterized by two events in the history of Telugu cinema: Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao's (NTR) election as the chief minister of the state and his subsequent exit from the industry,³ and the release of *Khaidi* (A. Kodandarami Reddy, 1983), which launched Chiranjeevi as a star. Srinivas concentrated primarily on the fan phenomenon and the unique case of the production of the caderized fan⁴, as the cinema-politics interface in the industry was his field of inquiry. He closely examines Chiranjeevi's career whose switch to politics provided him with an important case study. Srinivas critically analyzes Telugu film industry's production of a star-politician through extensive field research and a discussion of relevant film narratives.

In his most recent book *Politics as Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema* (henceforth *Politics*), Srinivas situates the question of the cinema-politics interface previously raised in *Megastar* within a much larger historical framework. *Politics* is much more ambitious than *Megastar* as it traces Telugu cinema's complex linkages with politics, thus filling a gap in film studies as well as in the social sciences. There has always been a dearth of scholarly works on the subject. Here Srinivas considers five decades, from the era of Gandhian melodrama in the 1930s to a detailed reading of the phenomenal election campaign of NTR in 1982-1983. Srinivas looks at the intriguing history of Telugu cinema in order to critically examine the latter's potential to outlive the state of Andhra Pradesh.

³ It is not that NTR did not act in films after being sworn in as the chief minister; in fact he continued to produce and direct most of the films in which he acted. These films include: *Srimat Virat Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra* (NTR, 1984), *Brahmarishi Vishwamitra* (NTR, 1991), *Samrat Ashok* (NTR, 1992), *Srinatha Kavisarvabhauma* (Bapu, 1993). Srinivas mentions in *Politics* (2013) that *Charitra* was the last successful film to be directed and produced by NTR.

⁴ The term designates the transformation of the fan into a political cadre campaigning for the star.

Srinivas relies upon archival research and textual analysis of films, popular publications, newspapers, and other visual materials. These are the primary methodologies used in the book. He makes extensive use of sociological, political, cultural, and film theories to formulate his argument and makes available a hitherto unprecedented range of materials (including government records, mainstream newspapers, film song booklets, film magazines, film industry publications, film chamber of commerce journals, 'yellow' journals, pulp fiction etc.), most of which have been gathered from M. V. Rayudu's Manasu Foundation in Bangalore, and other archives.

Further, Srinivas engages with sociologists and political scientists like K. Balagopal, K. C. Suri, and Atul Kohli who have written on NTR's election campaign and the landmark 1983 state assembly election in Andhra. Ranjani Mazumdar argued that the three major film studies trajectories in India are the nationalist, the ideological, and the biographical/historical. Unlike Madhava Prasad whose research on Bombay cinema is a representative work of the ideological school, Srinivas rejects ideological critique as a frame of research in favour of the economic history of the industry. Srinivas attempts to discuss the economic and political rise of the post-feudal, post-colonial elite as supported by the political economy of the industry. As the industry becomes increasingly successful in producing star-politicians like NTR as representatives of this elite group, the socio-political significance of cinema in Southern India gets manifested even more. In the concluding chapters of *Politics*, Srinivas tries to understand mass politics by extending the notion of populism through the analysis of film texts and theories of spectatorship.

Politics has a five-part structure, and the first two chapters are concerned primarily with the formation of the industry and the subsequent issues it raised. Srinivas discusses the way the agrarian capital of coastal Andhra was channelized and transformed into film industrial capital giving rise to a specific caste-class constellation that dominated the industry for years. The rich peasant class of coastal Andhra, consisting primarily of non-

Brahmin upper castes like Kamma, Reddy, Velama and others,⁵ found the nascent cinema industry a safe destination for investment as investing in agriculture was risky during the global depression. This caste-class constellation formed a nationalist elite in Andhra, challenging the supremacy of the erstwhile feudal-lords.⁶ Their cinema, known popularly and film-industrially as social-reform films, was substantially influenced by Gandhian ideology. Srinivas goes on to describe the respective careers of the two pioneers of this class, Gudavalli Ramabrahmam and B. N. Reddi, in detail. While Ramabrahmam is better known for infusing films with Gandhian nationalism, B. N. Reddi is associated with the aesthetic advancement of Telugu cinema with several literary adaptations to his credit. But what attracts Srinivas' attention is the similarity in their respective careers. Both of them belong to an era marked by the conclusive shift away from the feudal domination of the industry and industry's reliance on feudal investments, which paved the way clear for the rise of the landed gentry. In the next chapter, Srinivas dexterously links the question of the industry's caste-class hierarchy with the linguistic identity politics in the 1950s that contributed to the formation of Andhra Pradesh. The idea of a Telugu nation and the conception of Teluguness as a linguistic identity were reshaped by the fast-unto-death movement of Potti Sriramulu and the formation of the regional state. It ignored the popular demands for a separate Telangana, even though the movement for the latter coincided with the movement for the unified Andhra. The consequences included a huge cry for the faithful representation of Teluguness in Telugu cinema, for which the relocation of the industry from Madras to Hyderabad was necessary. Despite the assurance of government incentives in Hyderabad, very few people were interested in upholding Teluguness at the expense of better production facilities available in Madras. NTR's rival star Akkineni Nageswara Rao (known as ANR) relocated to Hyderabad for a certain period of time,

⁵ By the term non-Brahmin upper castes I mean the *Sudra* upper castes, which constitute the landed gentry of the region. With the transformation of the agrarian capital into the film-industrial capital these castes (especially the Kamma caste) started to dominate the industry, which continued till the advent of Chiranjeevi, the first non-Kamma star of the industry.

⁶ Powerful feudal landlords of Nellore, Venkatagiri and Bobbili successfully appealed to the colonial administration to suspend the screening of Gudavalli Ramabrahmam's Gandhian social reform film *Raitu Bidda* (1939) in their respective areas. Accordingly, a distinction must be made between rich peasant-investors and the zamindars/Rajas, even though the Rajas of Chalapalli and Mirzapuram were among those who invested in the industry.

and NTR refused to follow his footsteps. The question that Srinivas formulates from this is how NTR became the symbol of Teluguness/Telugu pride in 1983 despite the fact that he, unlike ANR, never prioritized the concerns of nativity over production facilities.

To find an answer for this, Srinivas makes a journey through the career of NTR in the chapter that follows, starting from his mythological and folklore films, to the early *socials*, to the 1970s films launching him as a mobilizer of the masses, to the *campaign* films of the 1980s. He argues that Telugu cinema is essentially populist and its uniqueness lies in the relative absence of linguistic identity politics in its course, as opposed to its counterparts in the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The abundance of mythological films in Telugu after the decline of the genre elsewhere is a case in point. Mythological films, unlike socials, are based on common Hindu myths familiar in every Indian household and they include hardly anything specifically concerning the Telugu identity in them. The most crucial part of Srinivas' argument is how the question of Teluguness itself was refashioned and how the way it used to be understood in the 1950s lost its relevance. Srinivas goes on to discuss how NTR spoke a high-sounding pseudo-classical Telugu in his cinema which he terms as *Mythological speech* and how this classical rhetoric specific to his cinema made its way to his political-electoral speech after his sudden crossover to politics. Carefully analyzing NTR's electoral campaign as mediated by the emergent print media of a pan-Andhra Pradesh variety, Srinivas makes the case for his argument of *misrecognition*. Srinivas argues that NTR's cinema and cine-politics *misrecognized* the spectator assembled before the screen/political meeting as the Telugu nation. The formation of this *Cinema Janam* (used derogatorily by NTR's detractors and political rivals) temporarily resolved the question of a separate Telangana by invoking Telugu nationalism.

Srinivas concludes his book with an account of the near-formation of a separate Telangana, of the vandalism perpetrated by some pro-Telangana activists on the statues of eminent Telugus in Hyderabad Tank Bund area, of the way *Telugu Talli* (mother goddess of the Telugu nation) has been replaced in the popular imagination by *Telangana Talli*, and how NTR's brand of electoral politics/speech has spread across

this part of the world even when his political ideology is in ruin.⁷ Apparently a prequel to *Megastar*, *Politics* ends with a comparison between Chiranjeevi's Tirupathi meeting and that of N. T. Rama Rao (popularly known as NTR) as it looks for the reasons behind the moderate political success of Chiranjeevi in comparison with his predecessor. He defines how NTR's brand of political speech outlives his ideology, as Telugu cinema will certainly outlive Andhra Pradesh, and shows how Chiranjeevi fails miserably in following NTR. The only disconcerting thing about the conclusion is the notion of *pathetic performance* of NTR, it remains much less satisfactorily explored than other themes within the book.

In *Politics as Performance*, Srinivas challenges various existing paradigms in Indian cinema studies. Firstly, he looks critically at the sudden upsurge of historical research in contemporary Indian cinema studies. Srinivas mentions in no unambiguous terms that his interest lies not merely in writing a history; he is interested in asking whether cinema studies can enrich the historiographic experience by adding to the existing historical knowledge. Secondly, Srinivas challenges formulations of Madhava Prasad and Ravi Vasudevan, two renowned film scholars working primarily on Bombay cinema.⁸ Prasad's explanation of the transition from the *mythological* to the *social* in Indian cinema has been reexamined with additions, as Srinivas argues that mythological and the folklore films provided the social resources to create the on-screen male authority or the star as mobilizer (Srinivas 176). Srinivas points out the divergences between NTR and Amitabh Bacchan vehicles of the 1970s, even though the former include some remakes of the latter. The lineage of NTR as an authority figure is introduced but not supplanted, it is an assemblage of traditional authority figures unforeseen in Telugu cinema (225). Srinivas argues that the masses at NTR's rallies are different from the kind that Ravi Vasudevan has addressed as *melodramatic public*. The formation of the political subject is a much more complex process here as this is not a transition from film spectatorship to political community. The subject already is a part of the group

⁷ I have come across low-budget films produced and made in Telangana that mock NTR accusing him for depriving the people of Telangana of a separate state and other governmental welfare opportunities.

⁸ Madhava Prasad is better known for his *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi: OUP, 1998) and Ravi Vasudevan for editing one of the earliest volumes devoted to the popular cinema in India, namely *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (Delhi: OUP, 2000).

assembled for political purposes, he has “returned to the cinema, whose pleasures the biggest star of the industry recalls from the political platform” (299).

Politics is an extremely important work that has rightfully been published amidst the centennial celebrations of Indian cinema.⁹ Locating it within the larger framework of Indian cinema studies, we can say that it refuses to accept the metahistorical, pan-Indian structures¹⁰ that dominate our film studies; it problematizes these structures and comes up with its own alternative histories instead. Indeed, Srinivas claims a special status for his respective industry in his narrative of ‘relocation,’ by suggesting the exportation of NTR’s electoral politics to the other parts of the nation. Here the cinematic argument is constituted around a city far removed from Mumbai. Scholars working on histories of various regional cinemas would do well to take note.

⁹ A number of conferences have been arranged across India and abroad to celebrate 100 years of Indian cinema. Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi are some of the institutions that have organized conferences/lectures series in India.

¹⁰ Madhava Prasad’s work on Bombay cinema is taught in all the film studies departments across India and the framework he has produced in the book has been taken as *the* existing paradigm for historical research. Regional cinema(s) have largely been ignored in the discipline of film studies, except for the auteurs who emerged from places like Bengal and Kerala.