

Citizens and Subjects of Telugu Cinema

S.V. Srinivas

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Political activists, civil liberties groups and academics have pointed out that while in theory every member of the general population is a citizen—with inalienable rights—in practice rights are available only to a small section of the society. We witness a situation in which a majority of the population is unable to exercise most rights ‘naturally’ available to the citizen. The human rights movement in the country has demonstrated that for the majority only sustained struggle make the exercise of rights possible. Further, and this something that has become increasingly obvious over the last few decades, the ability to exercise rights is linked to caste, community, class and gender. In the course of this paper I would like to examine how popular Telugu cinema comes to terms with problems of denial and exercise of rights in our context. My purpose here is not to identify the inadequacies of individual films or, for that matter, popular cinema in general, but to use film as a means of understanding issues related to citizenship.

Before moving on to the discussion of films, a few general points related to the notion of citizenship. Vivek Dhareshwar and R. Srivatsan (1996) argue there is a ‘split, a doubling, between the legal—political—moral subject (of the liberal discourse) and the empirical subject of political technologies’ (219). This formulation allows us to understand the gap between the citizen in theory—the bearer of ‘naturally’ endowed rights—and the denial of rights to the majority in practice. Madhava Prasad (1998) points out, ‘Although Citizen-Subject [the abstract figure on whom the discourse of rights is predicated] remains an incompletely realized utopic figure in all instances, it is also the case that this non-realization takes specific forms in different nation-state formations’ (54). The problem therefore is not merely the gap between the citizen-in-theory and the population at large—for there are no instances where such a gap does not exist—but the ways in which subject positions approximating to (or not) the citizen figure are produced in cinema. A further point has to do with particularity. Citizenship, point out Dhareshwar and Srivatsan (1996), is premised on the *absence* or transcendence of particularity: ‘if one the major conditions of democratization is a certain disincorporation of the subject’s positivity—my particularity has no bearing on my participation in the public sphere—not everyone can participate equally in the logic of disincorporation’ (223). It has been argued that in the Indian context the citizen figure is *invisibly marked* as upper caste, middle class, Hindu and male (Tharu and Niranjana 1996). Therefore, those who are not invisibly marked thus but are instead marked by the excess of particularity—by virtue of their caste, for instance—will find that their aspirations to citizenship are doomed to remain unfulfilled.

With reference to popular cinema, to demonstrate that it reinforces the social construction of citizen and non-citizen figures is facile and inadequate. To my mind how cinema presents the problem and its resolution is more interesting. In the rest of this paper I discuss three Telugu films belonging to different genres, *Ankuram* (Uma Maheswara Rao, 1992), *Osey Ramulamma* (Dasari Narayana Rao, 1997) and *Mutha Mestri* (A. Kodandarami Reddy, 1993) to underscore the centrality of the citizenship as an issue that begs resolution in the field of popular cinema.

Ankuram revolves around the attempt of a middle class woman Sindhura (Revathi) to find Satyam (Om Puri), a fellow traveller on a train, who leaves his infant daughter with her and disappears. What turns out to be long and painstaking investigation with the help of Rao

(Sarat Babu), a civil liberties activist and lawyer, reveals that Satyam was illegally arrested and tortured by the police who suspect that he is a naxalite. During the course of the search Sindhura is implicated in a false case by the police and her marriage breaks up as a result. Rao, along with others protesting police excesses, is beaten up by the police, Satyam's wife dies in police custody and Mitra (Charu Hasan), a pro-tribal doctor, is killed by plainclothesmen. The film ends with the production of Satyam before an enquiry committee by a dramatically transformed sub-inspector of police. But Satyam dies.

Ankuram not only deals with explicitly human rights issues but also contains incidents and characters drawn from the history of Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee. For example, the character of Dr. Mitra (Charu Hasan) is a rather direct reference to the noted civil liberties activist Dr. Ramanadham, who was allegedly murdered by policemen in civilian clothes. This degree of identification with the human rights movement is unusual for a Telugu film.¹

The narrative of *Ankuram* shifts between the suspenseful unraveling of the mystery of the missing man and personal hardships of Sindhura due to her interest in the case. The film's main narrative—the attempt to find the missing man—is framed as Sindhura's journey of discovery: the discovery of the oppressed; of the middle class citizen's *responsibilities* towards the oppressed; of the dangers and trauma accompanying the encounter between the citizen and her other.

In *Ankuram*, the crucial difference between middle class characters and tribals is not that the latter are victimised. Whether it is by the police or other institutions like the family the middle class characters in the film too suffer and they too are denied their rights (incidents of gratuitous police violence and criminality affects them too, though to a lesser degree than tribals). The distinguishing feature between these two categories of people is *the faculty of speech*: the ability to articulate the discourse of rights.

An illustrative sequence in the film foregrounds the gap between tribals and middle class characters, vis-a-vis the ability to speak the language of rights. The police, on the lookout for Satyam, arrest his pregnant wife when they do not find him. Angered by the arrest, some tribal youth prepare to attack the police but are prevented from doing so by Satyam's father. The tribals then gather before the police station. Dr. Mitra rushes to the police station when he is informed about the arrest. He reassures the tribals gathered at the police station and confidently walks up to the police sub-inspector. He demands the release of the woman stating that the police do not have any grounds for their action. Upon being insulted by the police officer, he counsels the crowd to remain calm and leaves to challenge the decision of the police in the court. The sadistic sub-inspector then forces the pregnant woman to do sit ups, resulting in her death. The crowd, which has remained a mute witness till this point, kills the inspector.

Throughout this sequence, as in the rest of the film, a clear distinction is maintained between tribals and the middle class citizen. The former *cannot* speak the language of rights. Their violent protest, although justified by the film, stands out as an instance of their failure. Notice that Satyam too, in spite of his education, shares this failure and his attempt to teach the language of rights to his community is somehow lacking. Satyam is marked by the same inadequacy that characterizes the rest of the community—the inability to speak.

¹ Also distinct is the film's combination of Indian new cinema style realism with dramatic plot developments that characterise popular melodrama.

In fact except for a short burst of speech, a dying declaration of sorts, Satyam is a silent victim of police torture for much of the film's present.

It is suggested in the film that the primary *duty* of citizens is to speak the language of rights on behalf of those who cannot. Indeed three major citizen figures in this film, Sindhura, Rao and Mitra, are seen fulfilling this duty.² Further, middle class citizens' rights are taken away when they try to fulfil this responsibility whereas the poor are always/already without rights. Consequently, equivalence is developed between the citizen and tribal since the bearer of rights is denied his/her rights at the precise moment when s/he tries to enable the tribal to enter the rights discourse.

Sindhura, Rao and Mitra, the film's middle class citizen figures, are seen mediating between the disenfranchised population and the state. By the end of the film Sindhura, who has been transformed from a middle class housewife to a civil liberties activist, takes on Satyam's role as the agent who brings rights to the tribals. M. Madhava Prasad (1998) points out, 'The citizen as the mediating figure between state and individual is an elusive mechanism of social organization in conditions of underdevelopment' (61). The elusiveness of the citizen and her mediation are brought to the foreground in the film's climax when Satyam is produced before the commission of inquiry. Satyam, the failed citizen, bursts into speech: 'we don't want these courts, laws, protection and subsidies. We want only one thing: A mother's hand to wipe our tears.... All we want are mothers like her [Sindhura]. Nothing else.' At the end of this statement he collapses and dies.

This is an indictment of the Law—gendered male and represented by the judge who is addressed as 'sir' and contrasted with Sindhura, the mother. It is also the Oedipal desire to (re)turn away from law (the father) to the primordial—mother but also community that is seen repeatedly intruded upon by the state, particularly the police.³ Satyam's speech not only reinstates the futility of his earlier attempt to make the community speak the language of law but also points at the elusiveness of citizenship itself. Sindhura's ability to represent the tribals is now described as something that is outside the domain of law—she is mother but not the citizen and her role is circumscribed by her gender identity. Interestingly, in the film it is left to the male lawyer Rao to interpret the story of Satyam's life/death in terms of law and democratic rights.

In *Ankuram*, as in a great deal of popular cinema in general, we notice a vast gap between middle class citizen figures such as Sindhura, Rao and Mitra on the one hand and Satyam and other tribals on the other. It is as if the 'citizen-subject' of the liberal discourse has been split into the citizen and the subject respectively, each distinguished by specific class, caste/community and gender location. The vastness of the gap between citizen and subject is an important indication of the trajectory of the narrative, which will attempt to bridge it or suggest the necessity of doing so (as in the case of *Ankuram*). Further, and this is critical in understanding the way popular cinema images citizenship, the citizen is not merely s/he who is endowed with rights but also s/he who *represents* the subject. This becomes clear when we look at *Osey Ramulamma*.

While the middle class—disincorporated—citizen figures in *Ankuram* speak for the population, tribals in particular, in *Osey Ramulamma*, the role of the citizen is somewhat

² Clearly the film is working with a long history of filmic representation of the citizen and his/her duties. I cannot discuss this here for reason of focus. See Srinivas (1999) for a discussion of the citizen figure in the 1930s Gandhian-reformist melodrama in Telugu.

³ See the discussion of the Hindi film *Deewar* in M. Madhava Prasad (1998) for an interesting discussion of the gendering of state and community.

differently imaged although even in this film a sustained attempt is made to mark the distinctness between the citizen and the subject. This film's narrative works to demonstrate the unequal distribution of the faculty of speech between the citizen (the bearer of rights) and subject (s/he who cannot exercise any rights) but also to make a citizen of Ramulamma.

The central character in *Osey Ramulamma* is Ramulamma (Vijayashanthi), a Dalit who has been raped as a child by the local landlord. She, like other Dalits, is a passive victim of circumstance till she kills the landlord's son, when the latter too tries to rape her, and escapes into the forest. The turning point in the narrative occurs in the forest when, chased by the landlord's men, she seeks the protection of Peddanna (literally eldest brother, played by Dasari Narayana Rao). Peddanna is a naxalite fighting for the rights of Dalits. Peddanna, instead of coming to her assistance inspires her to fight the landlord's men.

Significantly, Peddanna's call to Ramulamma is not merely to take on the landlord's private army but to become a *representative* of the Dalit community and the leader of the naxalite group. After she successfully chases away her pursuers Peddanna tells her that he desired precisely this response from her and adds: 'Rise! Become the eye of *your* ('nee') Dalit race. Become the gun in the hands of *these* ('ee') naxalites ('annalu', literally elder brothers which is the popular term for naxalites).' She has passed the test and thus Peddanna immediately renames her Ramulakka ('akka', elder sister, is used to refer to female naxalites) and inducts her into his squad.

There are indications in the film that Peddanna is himself not a Dalit. He is an 'outsider', marked by his education (in the broad sense of the term) and his speech—he speaks in the 'standard' coastal Andhra dialect, unlike the Dalits and even the villains in the film who speak in the Telangana dialect. Insofar as Peddanna is the agent of Ramulamma's transition from the mute victim into a representative of the Dalit community, he is a citizen figure. But Peddanna is an interesting variation of the citizen figure. The problem of incorporating the general population into the regime of rights takes an interesting *political* turn in this film. It is as if the citizen as outsider to the community that is being represented cannot be sustained any longer in the present historical context.

Osey Ramulamma belongs to a genre that is locally known as the red film or naxalite film. In the films of this genre the naxalite is a representative of the oppressed who often speaks the language of rights. Despite the 'forms and keepings' of this genre, it is possible to argue that the naxalite in these films is a citizen figure, albeit a vigilante citizen who at times belongs to the group he fights for (such as Dalits or tribals). It has been pointed out that this genre, associated with Narayana Murthy who produced and directed naxalite films in addition to starring in them, remained in the margins of the film industry for half a decade and underwent a transformation with major film industry players taking an interest in it (Balaji 1999). The result was the production of big budget star-studded naxalite films, which incorporated a number of elements from industrial genres—duets and elaborately choreographed fights, for example (*Adavilo Anna*, B. Gopal, 1997). *Osey Ramulamma*, the prime example of the industry's takeover of the genre, is the most commercially successful naxalite film ever. It features major stars like Vijayashanthi, Rami Reddy and the film's director Dasari Narayana Rao himself. With the entry of the genre into the 'mainstream', the hitherto invisible markings of the naxalite-citizen become visible.⁴ There is now a

⁴ *Adavilo Anna* is perhaps a better example of this development. In this film we see two generations of naxalites, both roles played by Mohan Babu. Commitment to the people and the naxalite cause is presented as something that the son inherits from his landlord-turned-naxalite father.

splitting of the representative functions of the citizen figure between Peddanna and Ramulamma: one is an outsider who speaks for Dalits and the other speaks as a Dalit and takes on the responsibility of violent confrontation against the feudal lord and the state. Arguably this division of labour among stars protagonists in the film is a consequence of the inadequacy of the upper caste and middle class citizen figure (seen in *Ankuram*) who speaks for the oppressed subject in an era of lower caste assertion.

Nevertheless, even here elusiveness remains a central tenet of the representation of citizenship. Not only is Ramulamma's transformation a direct consequence of Peddanna's mediation but her transformation into the rebel accompanies, indeed necessitates, the production of a wide gap between her and the rest of the community. The film suggests that the citizen-subject duality is now reproduced *within* the community, even as a subject now begins to acquire citizenship qualities. The members of her community become spectators of the spectacle of Ramulamma's transformation.⁵

This brings us to the question of how disincorporation occurs in popular cinema. In order to become a citizen figure, Ramulamma has to shed her particularity even as Peddanna's mediation enables her to speak (and act). The transcendence of particularity is made possible by the film's use of stardom: after all, Ramulamma *is* Vijayashanthi the star. The spectatorial address works to produce a double awareness in the spectator—Ramulamma is and isn't endowed with an excess. Insofar as she is a Dalit (the narrative says so and there is no denying this), she is marked by a particularity that has to be shed. But insofar as she is the *star* Vijayashanthi, she embodies the excess of stardom, which automatically raises her above the handicap imposed by community and gender identities.

The centrality of stardom to the spectacle of empowerment is in evidence in a number of films that deal with the denial and assertion of rights. *Mutha Mestri* is a case in point. In this film Bose (played by 'Megastar' Chiranjeevi) is a gangster of porters in a vegetable market who successfully enters politics to protect the interests of the poor. At no point in the film is the spectator allowed to forget that s/he is in the presence of the star Chiranjeevi.⁶ What Richard Dyer (1991) calls the 'nexus' between the 'star-as-image: star-as-real-person' is mobilized here in order to authenticate and render intelligible Bose's migration from subjecthood to citizenship.

A final point about *Mutha Mestri*, which is the two kinds of citizen figures in the film. Firstly there are reformists like Sundaraiah (Somayajulu) and the state's Chief Minister (Gummadi Venkateswara Rao) who speak for the 'people' from the outside i.e., they are distinctly marked as middle class, upper caste and also belonging to an older generation. These citizens like Sindhura and Peddanna are characterized by a sense of anxiety that is a direct consequence of their encounter with entire communities that are speechless and become their responsibility. On the other hand there is Bose who makes the transition from gangster to MLA and minister with remarkable ease. Clearly, the older citizen figure is inadequate and it is up to Bose to wage the struggle on behalf of the poor. Like Ramulamma, Bose is the negation of the *lack* that marks the community of subjects: they are what their communities lack. Yet the first kind of citizen is presented as desirable, if endangered (Sundaraiah is actually killed in the course of the film and there is a plot to remove the chief minister). Bose has a dual function: he has to speak for the subject figures and reinstate the citizen in his place as the centre of the polity. At the end of the film,

⁵ I am drawing on Madhava Prasad's observations on the films of Amitabh Bachchan (1998: 138-159).

⁶ As is typical of Chiranjeevi's films since the eighties, there are numerous references to the star and his earlier films.

having destroyed the corrupt alliance of politicians and government officials, Bose returns to the vegetable market as mutha mestri (gangster).

In the light of the above discussion it is possible to suggest that citizenship in popular cinema is certainly a privilege that is available to a small minority. However, the fact that a large part of the population remains outside the domain of rights is the cause of considerable anxiety, which is often projected on to citizen figures in film. The star is a means of addressing this anxiety, of making the masses available for reformist initiatives, of making them speak in a language *we* understand.

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