Chapter III

A Case Study of N T Rama Rao: Cinema as a Means of Political Communication

This chapter examines selected films of N T Rama Rao (herein referred as NTR) to trace his communication strategies through his films which created significant electoral constituencies. It is fascinating to examine the Telugu film’s journey after Independence. One can observe enormous difference between films that were made in pre and post-Independence decades. In previous chapter I looked at the pre-Independence films Malapilla and Rytu Bidda as vital visual texts that epitomized the political, cultural and social conditions of Telugu society in particular and south India in general. This was the period when film culture in south India was gaining ground as premier art form that tried in many ways to replicate or imitate other cultural forms of expressions like theatre and various folk traditions. The earlier Leftist interventions in culture can be traced back to the early 1940s in the founding of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). The thrust was on fashioning a progressive secular Indian modernism by incorporating elements from vernacular modernisms and the folk traditions. IPTA’s modernism was inspired, partly, by the model of ‘socialist realism’ of the then USSR and much of it is regionalized to suit the conditions. I have discussed various theatre and social movements (like IPTA and farmer’s rebellions) that influenced and shaped the contents of the films during pre-Independent era in previous chapters. Apart from these movements, Telugu literature has a major role in influencing the content of film, since most of the crew is from either literary circles or theatre. Hence films like Malapilla is a fine example of this category which is written by a radical writer like Gudipati Venkata Chalam, who had created a sensation by taking up the women’s cause during those times. But post-Independence cinema gradually tilted
from the ‘art form’ to the form of mere ‘entertainment industry’. However it would be
difficult to point out exact time and film that changed the trend in Telugu film making.
Because the films like Vandemataram (1939) and Sumangali (1940) by B.N. Reddy
under the banner of Vahini Studios, touch upon vital issues that were pertinent to the
issues of the period. Though Vandemataram is not directly refer to freedom struggle,
the title and a couple of scenes where the hero tears his degree certificate in anger
saying, ‘naa daridram theeripothundi, Nuvvu lekunte nenela brathakaleno
choosthanu,’ (I am done with my fate, I will see how cannot survive without you) was
not to the liking of a censor board member Samuel Ranganathan, an educationist. B.N.
had to incorporate the title, Mangalasutram and also convinced him saying that it was
not to defame the education system but he was only showing the frustrations of an
unemployed youth. B.N. who believed that cinema must be used to propagate a social
message showcased the issue of unemployment besides the evils of dowry. It has
elaborate melodrama, presented the problems of uneven development in terms of an
emotional conflict between and innocent feudal rural female and a worldly-wise
capitalist urban male. His next film Sumangali is also inspired by the social movements
that were led by Raja Rammohan Roy and Kandukuri Veereshalinga. Sumangali
strongly endorses the cause of widow remarriages. In fact the film is dedicated to the
women “who accidentally lost their husbands and to all Hindu widows who are living
in dire conditions” C. Nagayya had done the role of Kandukuri Vereshalingam. Hence,
one can observe immense influence of the social reform movements, nationalist
struggle and leftist movements (with its cultural wing IPTA) on Telugu cinema.
Though, Tamil cinema was much more influenced by Dravidian and justice party
politics which had strong undertones of anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindu ideology, Telugu
cinema is limited to minimal influence of those ideologies during pre-independence period.

**Genealogy of Nexus between Region and Caste in the post 1950s Telugu Cinema:**

Political formulations and ideological affiliations transformed rapidly during early years of 1950’s in political and cultural spheres. Certainly, these developments have an impact on Telugu film industry in terms of production, distribution and consumption. Though majority of the films were mythologicals that were produced according to the popular choice and dominated till 1970s, there were films that explicitly propagated the ideology of non-Brahmin movement that was more forceful in the regions of Andhra, especially, coastal Andhra Pradesh. The political and economical changes brought by green revolution in coastal Andhra enabled the ‘peasant castes’ to explore new avenues or riches, hence chose the industries like film, media and other industries. K. Balagopal points out the significant change in coastal Andhra’s economy in his article “A False Resurrection: Rise and Fall of Rama Rao”, “…the pride of place is taken by the twin symbols of coastal Andhra: cinema halls that look like rice-mills and rice-mills that look like cinema halls, give or take a chimney stack. The resemblance will no doubt offend any decent architect, but it is true to its salt, for the entire surplus that is generated by the delta agriculture goes in exactly two directions: agro-based industry and trade, and film production, distribution and exhibition” (1901). This vital change brought several alterations in order of the sociological structure. Due to irrigation facilities and green revolution, landed communities have benefited immensely. Balagopal states that

This wealth resides in a class, a class that is predominantly (but by no means exclusively) Kamma by caste and agrarian in its origins, which came of age in the period of the nationalist movement and the agrarian
struggles against the Zamindars and the British Raj. These struggles that attended its birth have also given it the largest share of participation in radical movements: socialism, rationalism, atheism, communism, and Radical Humanism—you name the heterodoxy and they have seen it. Over the period, they have also grown substantially rich, and have multiplied their riches since the Green Revolution (1901).

As a result, landed communities, especially, Kammans have started commanding the film industry like other media industries. Since the most of Telugu film production and distribution is controlled by this community, their politics have started dominating and determining the film content. Moreover, this community is denied the political power despite proving their economic success. They were kept out of political power. Balagopal in his article, “Politics as Property” discusses the reasons for denial of power to Kamma community:

In Andhra Pradesh Congress politics, for instance, the Brahmin leadership has had a more or less cozy relation with the Reddy landlords of Rayalaseema and Telangana, whereas in coastal Andhra the Kamma community's rise, in social and political terms, took place in an anti-Brahmin ambience, represented explicitly by non-Brahmin self-respect type of movements, and implicitly by the rationalist, atheist and communist movements. It was this Kamma community that developed a very able and talented middle class and a powerful entrepreneurial elite taking advantage of the positive material conditions prevalent in the region watered by the Krishna and Godavari rivers, which conditions became even better after the green revolution. And yet, the rise to
political power of these elite commensurate with its tremendous
dynamism was blocked by Congress strategies (2482).

Hence, these politics were much more ideological in nature than economic. The
significant social reform movement and non-Brahmin movement Andhra has a history
that has its roots from nineteenth century. K. C. Suri in his article “Non-Brahmin
movement in Andhra: A Study of the Nature of Protest against Bramhanical Order in
Andhra during colonial Times” traces these movement from 17th century. He includes
social reformers like Yogi Vemana and Sri Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami as part
Non-Bramhanic discourse. In his extensive research, he traces that resistance initially
started from Vishyas, Kamsalis (wood and gold smiths) and then it is spread to
Kammas. In this background, I would like to look at the cinema and its interfaces,
interferences, affiliations and influences from the dominant communities that have
shaped the film industry. I would also look at career of NTR as a film star and a
politician who is churned out of these ideological and political
tribulations. It is widely
perceived that the rise of NTR and his Telugu Desam Party (TDP) is generally seen as
the long delinquent assertion of this class caste (Kamma). Because his most ardent
followers belong to this caste/class and significant body in the coastal districts and
settlers in Rayalaseema and Telangana form his core group. Despite of being backed
by very tiny community, though rich and influential, is certainly a herculean task for
NTR. I would like to examine how he had come over this problem and could garner
sympathy and address the grievances of various sections of the people through his films.

The reason to choose to look at this aspect of NTR films in particular and Telugu
cinema in general, since most of the scholarly work in this area tends to limit itself to
the study of mythologicals and its influence on people and how it changed and
constructed the perception of particular star. Before going into the chapter, I would like to mention several scholars and film theoreticians’ whose fundamental arguments have formulated theories and argued regarding Mythological films and its impact on the people. Scholars like Chidananda Das Gupta in his article, “Seeing and believing, Science and “Mythology”: Notes on the Mythological Genre” discussed the logic behind Mythological and how they are created and produced visually on Indian screen. He argues that mythological films have successfully created “realism” and “believability” in audience mind. This is particularly true in the case of Telugu mythological genre. And he reasons for his argument and says that previously the country of the gods had existed only in the mind’s eye, sustained by a network of myths, legends, and static visual representations spawned by the traditional epics and the legendary repositories of history and religion called Puranas. The passionate loves and hates of the gods had been seen as play (leela) evoked by the devotee in his or her imagination. Now, suddenly, these imagined scenes were there, on the screen, as reality! Hence the visualization of mythological has had more impact on the audience mind than the socials. The other reason for this immense importance of the mythological genre is Indian film industry unlike other industries across the world did not see cinema as a scientific invention. Cinema is just considered as an extension theatre and folk performance. People were so thrilled at the technology but they could apply the same technology to create magnum opus creations like Rama, Krishna and epics that involved all the stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The thrill was no less than that of westerners who watched Lumiere brothers show on train moving.

Apart from basic stories, Indian cinema covered the sub stories of epics and visualized them. Going back to the argument of ‘realism and believability’ of mythological genre,
Das Gupta argues that art production was individualized in pre-industrial society. Art was an independent entity though it is byproduct of religion and regional culture, it enclosed within the narrow limits of social and geographical mobility. He further clarifies that in folk performances, acting is mostly displayed in open space or in dim lights, thus, not giving much scope for naturalism in acting and staging were not possible and the voice becomes very important in order to be heard. This is the style which is directly imported to cinema and modified and using it according to the changing times. And greater degree of naturalism is achieved through various techniques. This was more possible in mythologicals because people are already informed about the popular mythological stories and can get involved in the story and techniques through which the gods and demons certainly create believable conditions to the audience. On this line, Das Gupta examines the electoral success of MGR and NTR and proves that “The do-gooder of the screen was easily elected because myth and fact had merged; there was little public consciousness of savior image as illusion” (16).

He further explains the case of NTR as

NTR’s image as a manifestation of God had been firmly established.

Early in the morning, a crowd would assemble before his house every day, crying, Devudu! Devudu! (God! God!). The cinema stood the relationship of myth and fact on its head, Myth has become fact. The film star who plays God has become God. The cinema is too palpable, too reflective of the ‘surfaces of reality; the objects seen in it cannot be turned into mere symbols (16).

Here Das Gupta has examined the critical importance of the Mythologicals in shaping and influencing the people in general and electorally in particular. Extending the debate much further, Madhava Prasad argues on the construction of citizen-devotee through
cinema and other media discourses. He significantly brings the concept of *darsana* where this citizen-devotee gets *darsana* of his star in cinema hall, thus making the cinema public in cinema hall itself. S V Srinivas has demonstrated the significance of the larger context of south Indian cinema and politics within which NTR emerges as a star who can legitimately claim to represent the Telugu nation by juxtaposing both the mythological and social films.

Another scholar, Uma Brugubandi has looked at the ways in which NTR is shaped by the mythological as well as the ways in which he tried to shape it, both as an actor and director. She examined the way in which NTR sought to literally embody Telugu-Hindu history, tradition, and Myth and both through his physical presence and voice. By examining the case of NTR, she enables us to see the ways in which the popular cinema works on the concept of religion and tradition/heritage to produce and authorizes certain subjectivities which has potential to emerge as political and representative.

All these theorists provide us with the new frameworks within which to examine the nexus between cinema and politics. In this chapter, my aim is to fill the gaps of various scholarly arguments that have not addressed or perhaps not much focused on the part of political communication of NTR through selected films. I have chosen four films of NTR, from which two of them are acted and directed by NTR and the rest, are acted by NTR and directed by others. The films I have selected for this chapter are *Gandikota Rahasyam* (1969), *Dana Veera Sura Karna* (DVSK, 1977), *Yama Gola* (1977) and *Srimadvirat Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swamy Charithra* (1984). I consider NTR as a potential political communicator, who has addressed his electoral constituencies, rather than merely a star, who has influenced the people through his famous mythologicals and angry socials.
Political Communication introduces the complex relationship between politics, the media and democracy. Political communication is one of the fields that juxtapose both political science and communication which examines the production, dissemination, procession and effects of information, both through media and interpersonally, within a political, cultural and sociological context. This includes most importantly the study of the media, the analysis of speeches by politicians and those that are trying to influence the political process, and formal and informal conversations among members of the public, among other aspects.

The study and practice of political communication focuses on the ways and means of expression of a political nature. Robert E. Denton and Gary C. Woodward, two important contributors to the field, in *Political Communication in America* characterize it as the ways and intentions of message senders to influence the political environment. This includes public discussion (e.g. political speeches, news media coverage, and ordinary citizens’ talk) that considers who has authority to sanction, the allocation of public resources, which has authority to make decision, as well as social meaning like what makes someone American. In their words “the crucial factor that makes communication ‘political’ is not the source of a message, but its content and purpose”.

Political communication is used as the strategic use of communication to influence public knowledge, beliefs, and action on political matters. They emphasize the strategic nature of political communication, highlighting the role of persuasion in political discourse. Denton and Woodward point out that significance of political communication as “Political communicators seek practical and immediate results. Their effectiveness usually hinges on their adaption to the transient nature of public opinion and the fleeting attention of the mass media. They are often criticized for “rudderless” and “hypocritical” beliefs. Yet, taken on its own terms, political communication can
only be understood when there is willingness to reconstruct the immediate political context” (4). Though Denton and Woodward discuss political communication in American political context, these techniques very relevant to look at NTR phenomenon in which he exploited various caste, regional and religious tensions quite effectively and established his own space through his visual communication. Brian McNair provides a similar definition when he writes in his book *Introduction to political Communication* that political communication is “purposeful communication about politics” (4). For McNair this means that this not only covers verbal or written statements, but also visual representations such as dress, make-up, hairstyle or logo design. With other words, it also includes all those aspects that develop a “political identity” or “image” (135).

Through political mediation, or the process of interweaving the past, present, and future temporally to reach a reality that reconciles present contradictions, popular art informs the general public about “what’s happening” politically. Movies are a part of the popular aesthetic experience of our epoch and may be studied as part of the visual activity of our popular culture. In studying films as artifacts of mediation, there is a focus on intention, or the motives of the creators. Content is inferred from verbal and visual structure as linked to a political or sociological theory.

**NTR as a Political Communicator:**

I would like to begin looking at Mythologicals that have huge non-Brahmin movement rhetoric and played very important role in addressing the people through his cinema. *Daana Veera Sura Karna* is produced and directed by N. T. Rama Rao. He played three pivotal roles: Karna, Duryodhana, and Krishna. One of his sons, Balakrishna played a short role of Abimanyu, son of Arjuna. Another son, Hari Krishna, played the role of
Arjuna. *DVSK*’s production cost was less than ten lakhs. It earned more than one crore in the first run itself. Another record of the film is that it was sold for 60 lakhs for the repeat run in 1994 with 30 s and earned more than one crore in the repeat run too. These figures show the popularity of the film and the importance of the film content at different periods of the time. *DVSK* can be claimed to be one of the lengthiest films in Telugu film industry and even in the Indian film industry on the whole! Its running time is 4 hrs 17 minutes. Out of this, NTR can be seen on the screen for nearly four hours. The basic plot of the film is similar to the popular Karna’s story of Mahabharata.

Since the film is on Karna, entire plot revolves around Karna and elevates him in a positive light as much as possible and the film ends with his unfortunate death. The film starts with Karna's birth. When Kunti is a young woman, a wise though irascible old man, the sage Durvasa, visits her father’s palace, where Kunti serves him with utmost care for an entire year. Pleased by her service and hospitality, the sage foresees that Kunti would have difficulty having a child after her marriage to Pandu, and grants her a boon to overcome this difficulty. By this boon she could call upon any god of her choice, and receives a child through him. Out of curiosity, Kunti still being unmarried, she decides to test the power of the mantra and called upon the god Surya. Compelled by the power of this mantra, Surya appears before her and grant her a son, who was as radiant and powerful as Surya himself. The baby was wearing armor (‘Kavacha’) and a pair of earrings (‘Kundala’). Though Kunti has not physically given birth to the baby, she is unwilling to be accused of being an unmarried mother and so with the help of her maid Dhatri, she placed the baby Karna in a basket and set him afloat on ‘Ashwa’ a tributary of the holy river Ganges, the Ashwanadi, in the hope that he would be taken in by another family. The child Karna was found by Adhiratha, a charioteer of King Dhritarashtra of Hastinapur. Adhiratha and his wife Radha raised the boy as their own
The name *Karna*, however, denotes ‘ear’, because Karna was born with divine earrings. During his adult days, Karna is refused to be trained by Kuru-Pandu guru, Dronacharya due to his caste of not being born as a Kshatriya. After being refused by Dronacharya, Karna seeks help of Bhargava maharshi to learn the warfare. Karna was able to learn various martial arts in a very short time. But, Karna wants to learn all the advanced skills of archery including the use of divine weapons. After being refused by Dronacharya, Karna decides to learn from Parashurama, Dronacharya's own guru, who was known to teach only Brahmins. He appears before Parashurama as a Brahmin and requests him to allow him as a student. Parashurama accepts him and trained him to such a point that he declared Karna to be equal to himself in the art of warfare and archery. Eventually, Parashurama discovers the fact that Karna is not Brahmin and he is been deceived, hence curses him that Karna would forget all the mantras required to wield the divine weapon Bramastra, the most destructive weapon in archery, at the moment of his greatest need. Likewise Karna is cursed in many instances, some are accidental and some are plotted by several gods. But the life of Karna is turned when Dronacharya holds a tournament at Hastinapur, to display the skills of the Kuru princes. His student Arjuna was shown to be a particularly gifted archer. Karna arrives at this tournament, however, and after surpassing Arjuna's feats, challenged him to a duel. Kripacharya refuses Karna his duel, asking first for his clan and kingdom; for according to the rules of dueling, only a prince could challenge Arjuna to a duel since he is a prince of the Kuru house. Duryodhana, the eldest of the one-hundred sons of the blind king Dhritarashtra, knew that the Pandavas, the five sons of King Pandu, younger brother of King Dhritarashtra, were better than him and his brothers at warfare and saw Karna as a chance to get on even terms with them. He immediately offers Karna the
thron of the kingdom of Anga, making him a king and hence eligible to fight a duel with Arjuna. When Karna asked him how and what he could do to repay him, Duryodhana tells him that all he wants is his friendship.

Figure 5. Dhuryodhana questions the logic of court rules and announces Karna as the king of Anga.

This event establishes key relationships in the *Mahabharata*, namely, the strong bond between Duryodhana and Karna, the intense rivalry between Karna and Arjuna, and the enmity in general between the Pandavas and Karna himself. Karna becomes loyal and true soldier to Duryodhana. He helps him to marry the princess of Chitragandha. Following his accession to the throne of Anga, Karna takes an oath that anyone who approaches him with a request at midday, when he worships the sun, would not leave
empty-handed. This practice contributed to Karna's fame as well as to his downfall, as Indra takes an advantage of it in order to take away his kavacha kundala. Ultimately, in the climax, Karna's unfailing generosity resulted in his death on the Kurukshetra battlefield.

Apart from the basic story visualization and manufacturing the Karna image in a most positive light, the film presents certain elements of mythology of Mahabharata in very different way unlike various stories of Karna that are widely circulated among the people. It has drawn heavily upon the influential anti-Bramhanical rhetoric of the writers like Tripurani Ramaswami Chowdari and inserting contemporary questions of caste. In this background, one can reveal the certain ideological revelation from this film. As argued by Denton and Woodward, “Political messages are not neutral. Messages are created with the target audience in mind. Such an audience centered approach properly forces the analyst to think in terms of process that govern the search for a consensus, or to its unmasking” (6). The script of the film is written by well known poet, Kondaveeti Venkata Kavulu, an influential member of the Abyudaya Rachayithala Sangam (Progressive Writers Association). It is believed that the poet did not agree to write the script, but being requested repeatedly by NTR himself, ha had taken up the task. NTR had taken special care in constructing the character of Karna. Both the Karna and Durodhana are re-invented as the saviours of Dharma and known for righteous characters. The important alteration that is attempted in this film is characters of Ekalavya and Karna are brought together which we don’t find in ‘original’ story Mahabharata. When Dronacharya asks Ekalavaya to present his thumb as his guru dhakshina, Karna surfaces into the scene to counter the Drona and Pandavas and accuses them of treachery and evil attitude. This is the first scene we see him as a grown man on the screen. Karna ferociously attacks Drona of being racial and casteist and
accuses them that they have deceived bright tribal purely on jealous. He reveals his own suffering due to his sudra status. He challenges the Pandavas that he will earn better expertise over warfare than Arjuna and deafest them. Here Karna is presented as the savior and the resistant figure to the deeds of Drona by raising the question “evadu guruvu, evadu shisudu” (who is the guru and who is the student?). By this he questions the entire structure of Ashrama Dharma system.
Figure 6. Karna questions the injustice done to Ekalavya and vows to take revenge. In a next scene, when Karna is cursed by a Brahmin for killing his cow, he retorts as “jivithanni shapalatho vyartham cheyyaka manava kalyanam kosam viniyoginchandi” (instead using the chants for giving banes to innocent, use it for the betterment of the society). Hence Karna is introduced in the film with anti-Brahmin note which can be understood as the result of NTR’s ideological leanings of non-Brahmin movement. Likewise, the character of Duryodhana (which is also played by NTR), as a mighty warrior, is also introduced as a person who posses highest regard to social justice and the savior of Dharma, despite facing several odds. Duryodhana’s famous dialogues “emantivi emantivi” proves out to be the epitome of the best example to prove that NTR’s intention on the Varnashrama Dharma and rules of propriety and rules of governance. He successfully reveals the double standards of the court, especially Drona and Pandavas and takes them back to several incidents where Sudras and lower castes are appreciated and rewarded. He declares that “nedu e sakala maha jana samakshamuna, panditha samakshamuna, sakala, sarvada, sahada, sahasrada, e kula kalamahapinkilamunu shashwathanga prakshalana gavinchedanu” (today, in the presence of people, scholars, I will permanently settle the evil structure of the caste). This is one of the scenes in the history of Telugu cinema, that too in mythological genre, where the issue of caste and identities of Sudras are discussed openly after Malapilla.
Both the introduction scenes of Karna and Duryodhana indicate that these characters have abandoned the social structure of the times and portrayed as the rebels who are fighting against the evil system. However, it is evident that both the characters are very vocal only against the Bramhins and Kshatrya rules of the games but never attack the caste system in general which significantly symbolizes the politics of non-Brahmin movement and Justice party politics who only fought against the ‘immediate superiors’, Brahmins. These politics and the ideological dilemma are discussed in K. C. Suri’s Article, “Non Brahmin Movement in Andhra: A study of the Nature of Protest against Bramhincal Order in Andhra during Colonial Times”. He observes that,

The significant social reform activity and anti-Brahmin protest, which Andhra experienced during the nineteenth century, had implications to the forms and essence of anti Brahmin protests in twentieth century. As was acknowledged by the advocates of anti-Brahmanism, they drew inspiration from those who endeavored earlier to secure a higher social status and cultural rights to non-Bramhanas. The inability or refusal to see the historical continuities, to relate the contemporary processes to what had gone before in ideation and social practice prevents us from arriving at a meaningful understanding of the non-Brahmin movement, if not distorts the very understanding itself. Similarly, to view every protest/movement as result of a well calculated strategy and machinations of self seeking top elites in the concerned strata also does not help much. It is natural that advanced elements of given social strata tend to be the articulators of its grievances, emotions and protest. They accelerate the process of awakening and are the organizers, although in the process they strive to secure their interests. But only insofar the
interests overlap with the aspirations of the larger group/caste they can become leaders. There is always a symbiotic relation between the leaders and the led in both the dominant and the subordinate groups in any activity against each other. These leaders can be said to be qua leaders insofar this live connection between the two is not snapped (5).

This argument regarding the politics of non-Brahmin movement is quite visible while reading the films like *Daana Veera Sura Karna* and *Sri Madvirat Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swamy Charithra*. Both the films are directed by NTR and the primary characters in these films are played by him and the virulent thematic attack on Bramhanical structure is also similar. Both the films limit themselves to criticize the Brahmins but not touch upon the core Hindu beliefs or the system. The well calculated strategy of attacking only immediate superiors as part of their non-Brahmin movement and their concept of ‘reform’ and re-‘formation’ is evident. This dilemma or strategic silence is mentioned by K. C. Suri as:

*Struggles against Bramhanical order contain inner contradictions because the Varna-jati system is a complex one. In a society where the varnas and jatis are arranged in a hierarchical order like a ladder what had happened and is happening is that a caste which questions the supremacy of higher caste would like to assert its own superiority over the castes further below. The members of these castes want elevate themselves and aspire freedom from upper caste dominance and equality with those above them. But often most of them are disinclined or show aversion to the claim of lower caste people for an extension of the same principle of equality for them too. This is true of all struggles of the*
intermediate castes situated between the highest, the *bramhan varna*,
and the lowest, the *panchama verna*. (7)

This re-‘formation’ of the caste structure which only demanded equal status with Brahmins and to be recognized as Kshatriya status but ignore other lower castes who demand the same equality. The scene where Karna is crowned and was gifted *Anga rajya* by Duryodhana shows the demands of non-Brahmin figure. Immediately after the crowning ceremony, Karna touches the feet of Duryodhana and washes with the water of Ganga, thus implicating Karna accepting the superiority of Duryodhana. As a loyal soldier, Karna promises that he will dedicate his life to serve him and his sovereignty (*…yasho rakhanaku, sarvabowmadhikara parirakshanaku na jivitham ankitam*).

Apart from portraying Karna as tragic hero, he is also presented as a religious reformer and most impotently as a Hindu nationalist. When Karna is denied a chance to lead the war by Beeshma due to his *Sudra* status, he reacts sharply against caste discrimination and says that “*e kula, matha bedhalu, varna vishayalu entha kalam mana bavanalo, pravarthana lo gudu kattukoni untayo antha kalam e Hindiva jathi nirviryangane untundhi. Mana desham, mana samiykyatha mukkalu chekkalu kaka thappadu*” (As long as these caste and religious difference are there in our thoughts and in our minds, our Hindu race will be soon mustered out. Our country and our unity will bind to be broken). This particular dialogue reveals the ideological interventions of ‘nationalist reformer figure’ which is against Bramhanical dominance but desires for the status quo of the caste hierarchy in which they are par with Brahmins and determined to save Hindu religion and values in order to establish *Hindu Rashtra*. 
Srimadvirat Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra: NTR as ‘Inclusive’ Leader

The next film which also falls under same thematic category of Dana Veera Sura Karna is Srimadvirat Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra. I grouped these two films together as both the films address the issue caste and takes up reformist language. Srimad Virat Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra (1984) is a Telugu hagiographical film acted and directed by N. T. Rama Rao and produced by his own production house Ramakrishna Cine Studios in 1984 right after his political success. Pothuluri Veerabrahmam or (Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swamy) was a well-known saint and seer in the 17th century. He is the author of ‘Kaala Gnanam’ which is a work of chanting poems with future predictions. He had thousands of disciples who followed his principles and theories. The film was successful since the plot of the film is quiet popular among Telugu audience. Though very little is known about Sri Veera-Brahmam’s childhood except that he was the son of Sri Paripurnachari and Smt Prakruthamba and that he grew up under the care of foster parents, Sri Veera Bhojacharya head of the Papagni matt near Nandikonda and his wife Veera-Papamba. The child is called “Veeram Bhotlayya” who used to impress everyone by his extraordinary intelligence and spiritual bent of mind. The film tries to capture the popular imagination of the basic story of Sri Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami. The story starts with Veerabrahmam’s birth, growth as extraordinary child and his saint life and death. The plot of the film develops elaborately from his thirteenth year after his foster father’s death, Veerabrahmam leaves home and goes on a pilgrimage to holy places. While visiting several places, he meets an elderly devotee, Acchamma, who initially entrusted Veerabrahmam with the task of tending cows is surprised to hear that the young man was spending more of his time inside a cave scribbling something on
palm-leaf parchments. She follows him one-day and observes him draw a line round the cattle and command them to stay within the line. The cattle implicitly obeyed his command and Acchamma realizes that the boy is not an ordinary shepherd but must be a God man of great powers. Veerabrahamam gives her initiation into ‘Dwadashakshari’ mantra, and begged by her consented to stay for some more in her village. Acchamma was one of the few who were given the privilege of listening to the future predictions written in the form of chants by Sri Veerabrahamam. During his stay at matt, Veerabrahamam used to bury the palm leaf parchments in a secret place underground and visitors to this day make it a point to pay homage to the Tamarind tree that grew in that spot. During his stay in that village Veerabrahamam performs many miracles. He restored eyesight to Acchamma’s son, Brahmananda Reddy by suggesting a retribution for Reddy’s sins of a past life. Once the Nawab of that region who was jealous of the fame of Veerabrahamam sends word to him and after a hypocritical show of respect and Courtesy, presents him a platter covered with a muslin cloth. Knowing that meat was taboo to the Hindu sage he still filled the plate with dishes made of meat. Veerabrahamam accepts the plate and removes the cloth cover. To the utter amazement of the Nawab and his courtiers the platter was heaped with beautiful flowers with no trace of meat anywhere. The Nawab realizes his deed and seeks forgiveness and donates land for the founding of an Ashram.

In the twelfth year of his stay, Veerabrahamam leaves for Kandimallaya Palle, a village in Cuddapa district. He takes up his carpenter profession and soon becomes the spiritual leader of the village community. While visiting the temple in a nearby hamlet, Veerabrahamam comes across a funeral procession. Going near the bier Veerabrahamam sprinkles holy ash (Vibhuthi) on the corpse and to the amazement of everyone the dead man gets down and bows to the feet of Veerabrahamam. This created a sensation in the
Village and most of the villagers begin worshipping Veerabrahmam as the very incarnation of God.

Veerabrahmam accords to a few seekers of that village knowledge of his *Kala Gnana* chants pertaining to events that would take place in the first five thousand years of Kali Yuga. Sivakotayya was one of those seekers (who also belong to Viswakarma community. It is indeed mentioned in the movie by one of the devotee that there is a Viswakarma family in the village) and he reverentially offers his daughter Govindamma as bride to Veerabrahmam. After the marriage the couple returns to Kandimallya Palli where the devotees builds an Ashram for them and the couple were blessed with four sons and a daughter. Meanwhile, a fifteen year old Muslim boy, Sheik Saheb came to the Ashram to become a disciple of Veerabrahmam. Eventually Sheik Saheb renamed as Siddhayya who is turned out to be the most loyal and devoted of his disciples. Accompanied by his disciples, Veerabrahmam (by then he is called as Sri Veerabrahmendra Swamy) visits several places. He surprises everyone in the court of the Nawab by lighting a lamp that had water in it, instead of oil. Apart from this, Sri Veerabrahmendra Swamy’s expounds of the six energy centers (Chakras) to Siddhayya and other devotees. However, on the other side, a fellow villager, Kakkayya, the cobbler who is stringent critic of Varna system, denounce Hindu beliefs and verbally attacks the hierarchical structure, wanted to see for him the deities presiding over each of the chakras. He murders his sleeping wife (who is also devotee of Sri Veerabrahmendra Swamy) and dissects her body. Failing to see any deities he rushes to Swamy to forgive in order get back his wife. Eventually Kakkayya turns out be an ardent devotee of Sri Veerabrahmendra Swamy and follows him along with Sidhayya. One fine day, Veerabrahmendra Swamy decides to leave his body by going into eternal sleep in the grave, leaves his Matt to the followers and instructs them to spread his ideals.
This is the basic story of Sri Veerabrahmendra Swami which is filmed near to the popular imagination of the wider audience of Andhra Pradesh. However, the most important issue which I would like raise is the way NTR perceived the basic story of Veerabrahmam and constructed the plot according to the politics of the time. At first, this film doesn’t just start with the Veerabrahmam’s story but with three other social reformers who are neither belong to the period of Veerabrahmam nor their ideology is similar to that of Veerabrahmam. Nonetheless, NTR introduces the film with three social reformers who have immensely influenced the Telugu society. They are Gowthama Buddha, Adi Shankaracharya and Yogi Vemana. It is very interesting to observe why NTR reinvented these figures on the screens before he could introduce his protagonist Sri Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swamy. Though one can arrive at conclusion that all of these figures fall under the category of social reformer, thus to elevate the character of Sri Veerabrahmam which is to large extent a logical argument. However, the question remains same as why only these three figures when Andhra region has produced many social reformers. Because all the social reformers whom NTR introduces and spends some considerable space in the film are who fought against Bramhanical hierarchical order in some form or other. Gowthama Buddha is introduced in the beginning of the movie as a sage who teaches peace and disseminates the ideas of Sangam (society), Budhi (wises) and Dharma (justice) and goes to a Pandit who agrees to render Ashtakshari maha manthra that gives moksha. However, the pundit warns him not share the manthra with anyone. In response to that, Buddha declares that he desires for a society which is based on equality not on the narrow minded hierarchical structure. Immediately after this scene, Adi Shankaracharya succeeds as the champion of Hindu reformer who liberalized the religion from the clutches of dogmatic rituals and adopted certain inclusive steps to achieve equal society especially
by declaring that it is the deed of the person that decides the caste not with the birth.

Well known story of Adi Shankaracharya’s story of encountering of an untouchable in disguise of lord Shiva is played in to introduce the character of Adi Shankaracharya, by thus propagating the ideals of Adi Shankaracharya’s. In the next scene, Yogi Vemana appears the poet-philosopher who is also well known for his mordacious attacks and caustic satires on Hindu orthodoxy and rituals, irrational customs and stagnant social structures. He preached his ideas to predominantly among the illiterate sections with lucid and appealing style. Here comes the chief protagonist of the film Sri Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swamy and gets into chief plot of the film.

Figure 7. NTR is introduced as Buddha, Adi Shankaracharya, Yogi Vemana and finally as Sri Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swamy in Srimad Virat Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra
NTR being the director of the film cleverly woven the story in a way that the popular imagination of Sri Veerabrahmam is retained as part of the core plot and strategically inserted his own ideological propagation and juxtaposed it with that of Veerabrahmam’s ideals. He ferociously condemned the caste hierarchical order and endorsed Vedas for everyone. He consorted philosophical discourses and preached that all were born equal by birth and it’s only the deeds that make a person, a Brahmin (reiterates the stand of Adi Shankaracharya). He severely condemned the Hindu notions of pollution and pronounces that all human bodies have same blood, hence, untouchability is unpardonable. In fact, Sri Veerabrahmam is one of the few saints who had devotees across castes and gender groups, a Muslim (renamed as Siddayya), a woman (Achamma) and a Dalit (Kakkayya) which symbolizes his popularity among diverse sections. Enacting the role of Veerabrahmam shows that NTR not only chose a popular subject that is worth making but also to address certain political constituents that he was desperate to win over. Sri Veerabrahmam belongs to Kamsali caste (Carpenter or wood smith) which falls under government defined category of Backward Caste (BC). And he is quiet popular among lower castes and women. It is discussed and proved in several studies that have focused on electoral politics of NTR that his political success was possible only with the support of backward castes and women along with his community, Kamma. Hence, NTR consolidated this key constituency with much more authenticity by reinventing himself as a god man and also as part of historical figure, adored by the large section of the society. The political conditions of the time have encouraged NTR to take pro Backward Caste plank. K. C. Suri addresses this electoral issue

...many who belong to the peasant and backward castes were alienated from the Congress Party from 1970 onwards due to the political
strategies followed by Indira Gandhi. Land reform and pro-Dalit rhetoric had alienated the peasant classes from it. Indira Gandhi's political strategy of forging alliances of national upper castes and the Dalits to undermine the hold of provincial leaders hailing from the intermediate castes and to tighten her grip over her own party and government and the people at large, proved to be counterproductive and ultimately boomeranged on her. An overwhelming majority of the BCs, who constitute about 40 per cent of the total population of the state, supported NTR because of the feeling prevalent among them that the policies of Indira Gandhi were mainly aimed at capturing the votes of the Dalits and that little was done by the Congress for the welfare of the BCs. (1482)

And the other important milestone by NTR with this film is playing the characters of three great reformers, Buddha, Adi Shankaracharya and Yogi Vemana whose roles he could not don in his long career of mythological and historical. The juxtaposition of these reformers with Sri Veerabrahmam story discloses various deliberations and conscious film content, mainly dialogues and songs. This film shows explicit influence of Dravidian politics that immensely influenced Tamil cinema. In the film, NTR openly announces that he fights against the Bramhanical structures and says “Sanskara shunaymina chitha pravuthulatho vruthulu sagisthunna metthani pululu inka mana samajam lo unnaru. Variki nenu gunapatam cheputhanu” (There are many professionals those are indulging in uncivilized activities in disguise of innocent tigers. I will teach them a lesson). One can consider this film is one of the very few films that had debated the caste issue quite extensively after Malapilla. When Veerabrahmam is not allowed to enter into Pushpagiri Peetam by few Brahmins, he argues with them on Vedas and Bagavad Gita and affirms that women and lower castes have every right to
enjoy equal rights as par with the Brahmins and sites various examples from Hindu sacred texts, thus, he reaffirms his belief in Hinduism and denounce Brahmanism strongly.

Figure 8. Pothuluri Veerabramaham questions the authority Brahmin scholars when he is denied entry into their colony.

Veerabrahmam alleges that Brahmins have destroyed the Hindu values by abetting with kings and traders for their own benefit. There is a special song where he questions the values and double standards of the Brahmins and reiterates once again that Hinduism is for everyone, Gita and Vedas can be read by anyone and accuses Brahmins for dividing the society on the name of the caste. Most of the dialogues are aimed at Brahmins and NTR plays as an agency for change that can bring down the mighty and bring the social justice. I have examined how the Chowdary figure (Kamma) in disguise of Gandhian acted as agency for Dalits in Malapilla, similarly NTR in these films (both
in Dana Veera Sura Karna and Sri Madvirat Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swamy) acted as an agency and as a voice that can channelize the resistance and bring the change in the society. Hence the agent figure takes on dominant culture/community/caste in order take over the position of the oppressor and to become the savior of the masses. This is evident in the episode of Kakkayya who is Madiga (Dalit sub-caste) strongly criticizes the Hindu beliefs and Varna system. However, the basic story of Sri Veerabrahmam reveals that Kakkayya becomes the devotee and serves him. Whereas in the film, kakkayya is seen as a ferocious critic of a Bramhanical order and verbally attacks all Hindu rituals and traditions. He talks of self respect and equality. On the other hand, Kakkayya’s wife becomes the devotee of Sri Veerabrahmam and forces Kakkayya to accompany her to visit. Kakkayya angrily responds to her request and chides the swamijis and religious gurus as people who don’t contribute anything to the welfare of the common man. However, Kakkayya’s wife responds to his questions as “edo oka roju oka mahathumudu vachi manalni kapadathadu” (One fine day, sage will come nad save us from all these troubles). It is directly referred to NTR as savior of the community which is the most oppressed in the society. Kakkayya is impressed with the ideals of Veerbramahm and eventually both Kakkayya and his wife become ardent devotees of Veerabrahamam. Intrestingly NTR has covered another important political constituency that is Madiga by taking up the cause of the community. Certainly Madigas revered him as reformer; after all they appeared for the first time on the silver screen in very positive light and energy. With this film, NTR apprehended his political constituency and communicated with them and made it part of electoral politics. The significant figures (consciously or unconsciously) are a Muslim, a woman, a Kamsali (Backward caste and a Madiga (cobbler)), who are also constituted important vote bank of NTR, are given prominent space in the film content.
And his brain child program of decentralization of powers and dissolving the posts of Karanam (village head, who takes care of taxes and land issues) are mentioned in the film. He satirically calls the Karanam of the village as “Kakulaku, Karanalaku namaskaram” (hello to crows and Karanam) and directly attacks the system of Karanam who controls the land and financial transactions of the village. He mocks at them and accuse them of cheating innocent villagers.

Here, I shift the focus to different set of films, Gandikota Rahasyam and Yama Gola. Both the films belong to different genres. Gandikota Rahasyam is fictional story but has a cultural significance in terms Gandikota history and its reinvention. And Yama Gola is a socio fantasy film which belongs to comedy genre. Both the films have thematic similarities in terms of the vocabulary these film uses.

I consider Gandikota Rahasyam (1969) as very important film in NTR’s career not in terms of box office collections but in terms of the content it spilled. It is one of the first films of NTR that has overt references to politics. Moreover it is one of the first films that discussed the issues of polity, governance, law and the idea of nation. The name of the film directly implicates that it is historical film. But the content of the film doesn’t seem to suggest that it is neither inspired nor taken from the history of Gandikota kingdom. Gandikota is a small village on the right bank of the river Penna, 15 km from Jammalamadugu in present Kadapa district, Andhra Pradesh. In the year 1350 A.D. the Mikkilineni King Rama Naidu, who did not have sons, got his only daughter married to Pemmasani Kumara Thimma Naidu. Pemmasani Kumara Thimma Naidu was the son of Rama Naidu’s brother-in-law and was the king of Bellamkonda in Guntur District. Rama Naidu then made Pemmasani Kumara Thimma Naidu as the ruler of Gandikota. Since then Gandikota was ruled by the Pemmasani rulers. Pemmasani
Nayakas have become prominent during Vijayanagar times as rulers of Gandikota. The Pemmasani warriors were one among the Kamma clans previously serving Kakatiya dynasty as army commanders and migrated to Vijayanagar in 1370 CE after the downfall of Musunuri Nayaks in Warangal. Hence Gandikota kingdom is considered as a kingdom primarily ruled by Kammas. During Justice party politics, several attempts have been made to document the history Gandikota. Then Guntur board president Kuppuswami to Muniswami Naidu and then prime minister of Madras, Muniswami Naidu who were prominent Kamma leaders in Justice Party have requested Gudavalli Ramabramham to document history of Kammas. Being an editor of ‘Samadarshini’ (Justice Party’s affiliated magazine), Gudavalli Ramabramham had shown much interest in the history and culture. This research personally helped him since he had taken up an assignment to write the history of his caste. As part of this, he visited Gandikota kingdom in Kadapa which was once ruled by Kamma king Pemmasani Timmanayudu. Ramabramham had gathered all the historical evidence and wrote a historical play, ‘Gandikota Pathanam’ (fall of Gandikota) based on Gandikota king. The play was an instant hit but his aim to compile the history of Kammas shelved due to other responsibilities.

If one looks at this background, the history of Gandikota is very important for NTR as it was once ruled by his caste men. Several attempts to historicize and document the history of Gandikota had gone in vain by prominent Kamma leaders. Hence it can be considered that there is an attempt done by NTR to reinvent the past in order to reveal the story of glorious kingdom to the people. NTR played dual roles as the king of Gandikota, good and innocent Jayanth and Raja, a young and brave man of kingdom who saves kingdom from villains. Though his film Gandikota Rahasyam does not portray the history of actual kingdom, but the fictional content of the film suggests the
ideal kingdom where king and democracy is possible, transparency in governance, social justice and uncorrupted government can be delivered.

The basic story of NTR’s *Gandikota Rahasyam* is about Jayanth, an innocent prince who is obsessed with lavish life style and neglects the kingdom. People of Gandikota are in utter grief with various problems. His cousin, Prathap eyes on the throne of Gandikota and makes sure that King Jayanth spends most of the time with his recreations. Prathap, with the help of army chief, plots against the prince to take over the kingdom. They plan to create anarchy in the kingdom to grow the dissatisfaction towards the prince. Hence they announce the occasion of ascending the throne and order the revenue officials to collect high taxes from the public. On the instructions Prathap, revenue and army officials torture the people by levying heavy taxes. As a result, huge discontent is created on the prince among people. People try to revolt against the practices of the officials under the leadership of a young and dynamic Raju. He resists the policies of tax and urge people not to pay the taxes. By knowing this discontent under the leadership of Raju, Prathap orders his men to jail him. When soldiers try to nab Raju, he escapes and gets into Jayanth’s palace accidentally. Raju meets Jayanth and get know that they look alike. Jayanth comes to know issues of heavy taxes that are levied on the people for crowning ceremony and promises to take back the decision. In the mean time, Prathap plans to kill Jayanth with poisonous juice in order to capture the throne. Raju enters into the role of Jayanth while Jayanth is diagnosed from poisonous juice. Raju takes over the kingdom in place of Jayanth and introduces people’s policies and good governance. Prathap doesn’t recognize Raju who is in disguise and is surprised over the behavior of Raju. By discovering that Raju and Jayanth are different people, Prathap bids to kill both of them but will be punished by both Raju and Jayanth at the end.
Unlike other historical genre, *Gandikota Rahasyam* is way backed by fictional material, except the name that suggests the kingdom of the past. And the basic plot also does not try to attempt to reveal the history. But the content of the film is highly politicized with its dialogues that are delivered by Raju, when he rules the kingdom in disguise of Jayanth. The film ought to be seen as a film that excogitates the glorious kingdom of Gandikota once ruled by a Kamma king by another Kamma film star, NTR. And NTR, both as a prince and as common man reinvents himself as a successful ruler and savior of the people from evil forces. If we look at the film like *Daana Veera Sura Karna* as
the film that resists the ideological domination of Bramhanical structure, *Gandikota Rahasyam* can be looked at as alternative structure in terms of governing the people and morals of government and resistance and satire on the then congress government at the state and the center lead by Indira Gandhi. Because, this film explicitly uses the word government in place of kingdom. The film starts with the scene of local Karanam, collecting taxes from the people to pay the king but looted by thugs who are hired by local zamindar. The character of Raju is introduced to save the money from those robbers and sends back money to the king. From the first scene onwards, it is established that state of affairs are in disorder and the kingdom is corrupted and misleading the people. When the taxes are heavily levied on the people, Raju goes to the public and conveys the brutal methods of the king. But the way he conveys the issue is worth mentioning. His meeting resembles a political meeting which is obviously unthinkable in the time Gandi Kota time under the kings. But NTR is directly addressing to the gathering (audience in theatre) in disguise of Raju. He uses the language revolution and explodes as “we once had glorious period in Gandikota once upon a time, but now they turned the Rama Rajya to Ravana Rajya. The language he uses does not seem to be the language of the people of the Gandi Kota but of Andhra Pradesh and his plea sounds like a call to dethrone the throne (government). He initially raises the issue of the tax and talk the rhetoric of democracy and revolution. And by mentioning of the glorious period of Gandi Kota as a Rama Rajya, NTR backs the kingdom of his caste men thus by guaranteeing the same by himself. This rhetoric can be conceived by his later electoral politics where he promised the Rama Rajya to the people of Andhra Pradesh if he is voted to the power. He angrily addresses the crowds when camera zooms in as “*manalni uddharichandaniki evaro digi vastharani anukovadam kevalam porapatu. Mana illu maname chakkadidhukovali. Mana*
brathuku maname bagu chesukovali. Enthakalam manam nidra pothune unnamu, ippudina nidra nunchi melkoni, adhikarula dhourjyanani prathigahtinchali. Okka shakthiga vijruimbinchali, oka vyagthiga munduku sagali” (It will be utter wrong; if we wait for anyone to change our lives, we should set our home by ourselves. We should better our lives on our own struggle. We have been sleeping all these days. At least, we should wake up now and condemn the atrocities of officials. We should rise as a power and we should move forward under the leadership of one man). These dialogues show the grandiloquence of NTR and his personal agenda set against the government of his time. Apart from gathering the crowds, he ferociously provokes the people and significantly comes forward to take the leadership role in the agitation. His longing for political power, thus, indirectly expressed his aspirations.

Further these aspirations are conveyed more precisely and clearly in the court, when NTR (Raju) takes up the crown in disguise of Jayanth. He announces several free-bees proudly such as removal of all forms of taxes in the future, housing will be provided to all needy, food and cloth for poor that are unthinkable in a kingdom like Gandi kota. He also declares that he will strive and establish the “adharsha prabuthvam” (ideal government) for sake of his people. These dialogues obviously implicates that he is addressing the ‘real people’ rather than addressing ‘reel people’. His darbar (court hall) is conceived much more like a modern day of secretariat where the head of the government takes quick decisions on the issues that are pertinent to the daily lives of its citizens. The darbar scene also reveals modern outlook and aspirations of real NTR in place of reel NTR. Several scenes are played where NTR utters long dialogues on government again. Denton and Woodward argue that
Generally, we conceive of political communication as a practical, process oriented, decision oriented activity. Because it is dependent on specific audience, its utility is strongly restricted by time, and by the willingness of political media to make its messages accessible…It includes many other forms of public discussion: reports, ‘public’ letters, defense of administrative action or inaction, hearings, ‘mediated accounts of events form the press, and even ostensibly ‘nonpolitical’ messages such as films and prime-time television. Ultimately, a crucial factor that makes communication “political” is not the source of a message, but its content and purpose (6).

Here NTR virulently attacks red-tapism while delay in the bridge works and condemns the system of mediators and the issue of corruption. He promises that every penny of the government will be spent in transparent manner and leaves no scope for its misuse. The way vocabularies of modern institutions are deployed in the cinema reflects the intentions and aspirations of NTR who wanted to play bigger role than mere a film star. Similarly, in Yama Gola, socio fantasy film, NTR satirized the government policies apart from anti-Bramhanic rhetoric.

Yama Gola-the name itself propels our imaginations to possible plot of the film. Much before this film, veteran director C. Pullaiah adapted a Bengali novel to make Devanthakudu, with NTR as the protagonist and SV Ranga Rao playing a Hindu god of Death-Lord Yama. After this, many stories with Yama as one of the characters came about. In 1977, Yamagola was conceived. The base of this theme is derived from a Hollywood production called Death Takes a Holiday (1934). This socio-fantasy had to undergo many script changes to finally reach a shape and a structure worthy of NTR.
The dialogue ‘Yamunda’, used by Lord Yama, played by Kaikala Satyanarayana becomes famous and is used in many other movies later on. This was actually adopted from the play ‘Savitri’ where the character of Yama uses this word on stage whenever he makes an entry. The script, story and even the title was passed to many hands, and finally it was Tatineni Rama Rao ventured to make the movie. The basic story of the film goes as Satyam (NTR) is a youth leader and a Panchayat Board President who stops the ex-President of the board, Rudrayya (Rao Gopala Rao) from executing his corrupt schemes. Satyam and Rudrayya’s daughter, Savithri (Jayapradha) are in love and plan to get married. So Rudrayya gets Satyam killed, who immediately goes to heaven. He angers the King of Heaven, Indra, who sends him straight to hell. In hell, he influences the soldiers of death, Yama’s army using famous communist theories and rights of labor, and turns them against their leader-Yama in comic way, and Hell shuts down. Yama sends him back to Earth, where Satyam changes his name and teaches Rudrayya a lesson.

This film carries anti-government dialogues as well. When a person is punished for being worked against religious beliefs in the hell, NTR protests and asks the reason for his punishment. Chitra Gupta replies that he is the reason for many murders on the earth. However, the person defends himself and says that he is a government official and just implemented the higher ups order. Despite of proving his innocence, Yama orders the punishment. NTR interrupts and defends the government official, arguing that it is not his crime but that of government and the people who are heading the government. Surprised Yama asks, who is government, then NTR replies that government is not directly involved but it is done by “Yuvajana nayakudu” (Youth leader) which directly implicates Mr. Sanjay Gandhi who was very active in forceful implementation family planning programme despite of serious criticism. There are
several scenes where NTR questions Yama and his soldiers regarding freedom of speech and freedom of protest as “whether we are in the period of emergency?” The references to Emergency time under Indira Gandhi’s leadership and the atrocities on the name of Family planning programme which is rigorously implemented by Sanjay Gandhi are satirized in the film.

In this chapter I looked at NTR as a powerful political communicator who addressed political, cultural issues of his time effectively through his films. Research on NTR has been overemphasized on his mythological roles of religious figures but not his social and folk films. Several social and cultural movements like non-Brahmin movement has influenced his film content and his later films have strategically inserted certain film content that counter ruling classes and establish him as the savior of the people by creating certain electoral constituencies across the region.


Films Cited


