Maoism to Mass Culture: Notes on Telangana’s Cultural Turn

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Abstract
Like other “regional” cinemas of southern India, Telugu cinema too has grown on the strength of its intimate linkages with both language politics and the linguistic state. In the more recent past, the relatively stable, if contentious, equilibrium between cinema, the linguistic state, and its official language was disrupted by a political movement demanding the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, which coincided with the proliferation of post-celluloid forms and modes of engagement with the moving image. This movement foregrounds the importance of region—understood as territory—as the site for nurturing, but more importantly producing, “cultural” differences among speakers of a single language. Telugu cinema came to be imbricated with a political mobilization engaged in, and driven by, the production of cultural difference, while the Telugu film industry as a whole came under sustained attack by activists and politicians supporting bifurcation for prejudicial and stereotypical representations of Telangana. The article focuses on a curious aspect of the movement for a separate Telangana state: the hypervisibility of communist and radical left propaganda forms, to examine how a minor film genre became a resource for the production of a territorially bound political community that reinforced the cultural logic of the linguistic state even as Andhra Pradesh, which was once ruled by a film star-turned-politician, was bifurcated.

Keywords
Telugu cinema, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, region, Naxalite, Naxalite film, Gaddar, propaganda, mass culture, cinema effect, YouTube

The Problem
Over the past decade or so, mobilizations in support of statehood for Telangana have been characterized by the high visibility of cultural forms and activists on the political platform. Further, cultural productions associated with the agitation left a large footprint on satellite television and the Internet even as the political context created the conditions for a hitherto unprecedented revival of folk forms from the region. Curiously, Maoist propaganda of earlier decades and cultural activists have been hypervisible in the statehood agitation. I say curious because Maoist groups which wielded considerable influence in the 1980s and 1990s have themselves been conspicuous by their absence in Andhra Pradesh from around 2006.
More importantly for our purposes, Maoist propaganda forms, to which we have far easier access today than ever before, are thoroughly mediated by mass cultural forms and digital technologies/interfaces. Notwithstanding a sprinkling of online forums and functioning front organizations, Maoists have little or no control over this process. Instead, yesterday’s propaganda has been detached from the politics that spawned it and has become dispersed media content, and also acquired a political significance which has little to do with Maoism.

Telugu cinema has had something to do with the mobility and re-signification of propaganda. For students of cinema, the complex phenomenon that is unfolding in Telangana is at once familiar and surprising. The imbrication of political mobilizations and media–cultural forms is a familiar problem in cinema studies. We are well aware that in southern India, the most visible manifestation of the politics–cinema linkage has been the male film star and his (relatively) big budget vehicle. In Telangana, the genre of cinema known as the red film or Naxalite film played a notable if modest role in the emergence of a regional culture industry that is driven by a political movement. The genre was/is, in fact, rather marginal to the Telugu film industry in terms of budgets, box office, and stars. This genre and its context allow us to examine in situ the afterlife of cinema as the moving image travels well beyond the cinema hall to other screens and sites of consumption that are also sites of political action, offering us some insights into the unexpected ways in which politics and mass culture dovetail in the twenty-first century.

In order to understand the new careers of both propaganda and cinema, it is necessary to situate the evolution of media–cultural forms and corresponding consumption patterns against the backdrop of a rather complex political history. I, therefore, begin with an overview of the political context, flagging a remarkable shift in the agitation that saw the bifurcation of the linguistic state of Andhra Pradesh by bringing culture—as resource and reason for politics—to the foreground.

Background

Andhra Pradesh state was formed in 1956 by merging the Telugu-speaking districts of the erstwhile Madras Presidency (Rayalaseema and Coastal Andhra regions, now residuary Andhra Pradesh) and Hyderabad state (Telangana). The States Reorganization Commission had opposed the merger of the two regions, as did political representatives of the Telangana region (Pingle, 2010). A student protest that began in December 1968 soon grew into a fullledged movement demanding a separate Telangana, bringing large parts of the region to a standstill (Forrester, 1970; Gray, 1971). The movement was contained but several protesters lost their lives in police firings. Statehood demands began to gather strength once again in the 1990s. Keshav Rao Jadhav (1997, p. 12) notes that two student organizations dedicated to the cause were formed around 1991. By the end of the 1990s, the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) People’s War—the largest and most influential radical left formation in the country—and other Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) or “Naxalite” (Maoist) groups extended their support to the demand. With lesser or greater intensity, the agitation continued till late July 2013, when the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution clearing the way for the formation of the Telangana state. The Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act was passed in February 2014 and the new state came into being in June 2014.

In the 1990s, arguments for statehood only occasionally referred to cultural differences between the state’s regions or the suppression of Telangana’s distinctive dialect and practices—both of which would be highlighted in the twenty-first century. The primary focus was underdevelopment: economic, educational, and employment disparities between the regions and the uneven distribution of state and natural
resources, especially water. Responding to the imminent creation of Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh, political scientist Pradeep Kumar (2000) included Telangana in his list of regions whose statehood demands were not based on cultural identity and said, “With the passage of time sentiment for language and culture has given way to the urge for speedier economic development” (p. 3078). In the following sections, we will see that Kumar’s observation proved to be way off the mark as far as Telangana is concerned because in the decade-and-a-half that followed, “sentiment” and culture came to play an increasingly important role in the statehood agitation.

Growing support for Telangana’s statehood coincided with the waning influence of Naxalite parties in the region during Y.S. Rajasekhar Reddy’s first term (2004–2009). An observer noted that the military option adopted by the Rajasekhar Reddy government succeeded in containing the Maoists (most prominently, Communist Party of India, Maoist, which had evolved from People’s War) in Andhra Pradesh by 2006 (Srinivas Reddy, 2007). Naxalite front organizations floated for Telangana’s statehood were marginalized shortly afterwards, partly due to the suppression of Naxalite parties but also, perhaps, due to the growing popularity of a new generation of political parties dedicated to Telangana state formation (discussed later). Paradoxically however, radical left propaganda forms and activists came to be seen and heard everywhere around this time.

While I focus on developments in the Telangana region in this article, the problem at hand is not limited to the region but has to do with the porosity between the domains of cultural consumption and mass mobilization in general. From the 1970s, several studies drew attention to specific forms which flagged this porosity at different points of time. Notable works include Hardgrave Jr (1973, 1979), Pandian (1992), and Prasad’s (2013) writings on film; Jeffrey’s (2010) book on newspapers; and Rajagopal’s (2001) work on television. The context I examine in this article is one in which film leaks into other forms and moving images are consumed on a variety of screens. This is indeed fortuitous because my material allows me to move beyond the work of particular media–cultural forms, and political formations, to the tracking of continuities and connections between forms and formations respectively.

In the sections that follow, I will examine the relationship between the popular, narrowly defined here as the domain of cultural production and consumption, and political mobilizations. I begin by briefly outlining the “cultural turn” of the Telangana agitation, examining its immediate causes, and then outline Maoist propaganda’s transformation into mass culture. I then discuss the important role played by the cinema in this process and conclude with a discussion of why Maoist propaganda and its key figures were so important a resource and referent for the agitation.

The Cultural Turn

Coinciding with the rising prominence of Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS, established in 2001) but not on account of the party’s activities alone, statehood demand came to hinge on cultural differences between Telangana and the rest of Andhra Pradesh, as also the denigration of Telangana dialect and culture. Several observers of Andhra Pradesh politics, including M. Kodanda Ram, a key leader of the Telangana agitation and Chairman of the Telangana Political Joint Action Committee (T-JAC), laid emphasis on the culture question. Argues Kodanda Ram, a political scientist by training: “Apart from exploiting the resources of Telangana for the benefit of the Andhra region, there has been a process of marginalisation of Telangana dialect and culture” (2007, p. 93). Anil Kumar, another political scientist, argues far more forcefully, “The current movement for Telangana is certainly caused not only by economic and political reasons, but also by the revulsion in the social and cultural spheres” (2007, p. 791; emphasis added).
This revulsion, he goes to add, is a result of the “regular humiliation of Telangana language, dialects and cultural practices” (ibid.) by the film and media industries dominated by Coastal Andhra Kamma caste entrepreneurs. Telugu film industry has been repeatedly criticized by other academics and political activists alike for its role in denigrating the region’s people and their culture (see, for example, Melkote, Revathi, Lalitha, Sajaya, & Suneetha, 2010).

Culture figures prominently in the report by Kannabhiran, Ramdas, Madhusudhan, Ashalatha, and Kumar (2010). It quotes the prominent Telugu filmmaker B. Narsing Rao—who was never a part of the film industry as such and was instead among the few art house directors working in Telugu—as making a rather emphatic claim to the region’s distinctiveness:

“For me, Telangana is an ethnicity that needs to be understood—we are a people with a language [sic], a culture, dress code, dialect and distinctive food habits. We also have distinctive literary and performative traditions. And a distinct history that goes back 1,300 years. My films tell stories of Telangana (cited in Kannabhiran et al., 2010, p. 70)

This report highlights humiliation and misrepresentation of the region’s culture and the “disappearance of a composite culture,” alongside land, water, and livelihood issues, in its account of Telangana politics.

Among the political leaders, K. Chandrasekhar Rao (KCR) of TRS has played the most important role in foregrounding culture as a key political issue and on a scale that is typical of classic nationalist mobilizations. According to Jagan Begari, “He [KCR] campaigned all over the Telangana and explained the... importance of local gods and goddess and explained how their culture and language was being undermined by the leaders of Andhra from all the political parties” (2009, pp. 17–18).

What I call the cultural turn of the Telangana statehood agitation was both reactive and affirmative. The condemnation of misrepresentation and humiliation of the region’s dialect and culture was accompanied by the revival and reinvention of tradition as well as construction of new symbols, which included the hitherto non-existent goddess, Telangana Talli (Mother Telangana). Folk culture occupies a pride of place in “Telangana culture.”

Other parts of India too have witnessed the large-scale commoditization of folk music, as also the massive growth of the folk as a genre of both music and live performance. Ratnakar Tripathy (2015) notes that in both Bihar and Haryana, a large number of singer-performers are mining vast repertories of folk music, often fusing it with Hindi films songs but also non-Indian sources, for their livelihood. Two notable features of similar developments in Telangana are: (a) appropriation/adaptation/revival of the folk is intimately linked to claims for the distinctiveness of Telangana dialect and culture, as can be seen in the statement of Narsing Rao cited earlier, with important political connotations; and (b) this mode of appropriating the folk for contemporary political mobilization is quite directly traceable to communist and Maoist cultural activists, who were active in the region from the 1940s. It also recalls the maneuver by the Telugu film industry in the 1940s and 1950s, which, partly due to the efforts of left-leaning creative workers, drew on folk forms to claim cultural distinctiveness for the cinema. In Telangana, literary, cultural, and political history was being rewritten to foreground the distinctiveness of the region (see also Begari, 2009, p. 30) and the link between this process and the political mobilization cannot be overstated. Anant Maringanti notes: “the bottom line of the current mobilisation is that a significant and visible section of the population has come to believe that there exists a distinct cultural region called Telangana” (2010, p. 34).

The cultural turn of the movement has multiple and complex linkages with Naxalite activists and the forms they developed to propagate their party ideologies. The change in the fortunes of left propaganda and its large-scale adaptation for electronic and digital forms of transmission was unanticipated. This is evident if we contrast statements made by participants of the third state conference of the Arunodaya...
Samskritika Samakhya, the cultural wing of the CPI(ML) New Democracy, in 2005, with subsequent developments. The keynote speaker “lamented that the proliferation of television channels had had a negative impact on arts, literature and culture” (Staff Reporter, 2005). By this time, cultural performances inspired by radical left cultural troupes began to be organized alongside political meetings demanding statehood, but they had not acquired much visibility on television or on the Internet for that matter. In less than five years, the Arunodaya activist Vimala (aka Vimalakka) would be seen performing frequently on private satellite television channels. My search for “Vimalakka” in March 2014 threw up over 8,000 results on YouTube alone. A majority of these videos are sourced from television channels or uploaded by them on their official YouTube channels.

Vimalakka is not the only performer-activist from the radical left to play a prominent role in the Telangana agitation. There are others like Goreti Venkanna, who was an activist of a different organization, also called Arunodaya (affiliated to the CPI(ML) Jana Sakthi), before becoming a film lyricist and television reality show judge. The most famous cultural figure to be associated with the Telangana movement is, without doubt, Gaddar (Gummadi Vithal Rao), the Dalit singer, poet, and performer who spent decades propagating the ideology of the CPI(ML) People’s War and was the Secretary of the party’s cultural wing, Jana Natya Mandal. He went underground in the 1980s and was shot and injured—allegedly by policemen in plain clothes—in 1997 (Shanker, n.d.). Venkat Rao notes that Gaddar was active as a singer and performer from the late 1960s when he dropped out of engineering college. He came under the influence of leftist writers and cultural activists a few years later (Rao, 1999a, pp. 253–254). He was subsequently attracted to the Naxalite movement.

In the early 1990s, Gaddar’s public meetings drew more people than those organized by actor-politician N.T. Rama Rao (NTR) at the peak of his popularity (Balagopal, 1990, p. 595). In the past decade, Gaddar has been one of the key figures in the Telangana movement. He is credited with organizing massive events in support of statehood, including one in 2008 that witnessed the gathering of some 12,000 poets, singers, and cultural activists under the aegis of Telangana Samskritika Samaikya (TSS) and T-JAC (Andhra Jyothi, 2008; see also Image 1). TSS was floated by Gaddar. He was associated with the CPI (Maoist) front organization, Telangana Praja Front (TPF, formed in 2010), which he chaired for some years. Of immediate significance for us is the extent of Gaddar’s contribution to the popularization of Naxalite propaganda. According to P. Kesava Kumar (2010, p. 63), this prolific composer had some 3,000 songs to his credit and 35 audio cassettes of his work were released by 2010.

While several singers and performers with Naxalite backgrounds were supporters of the statehood demand—and not surprisingly so because their parent parties endorsed it and floated front organizations to give the movement a leftward direction—a key site for the mainstreaming/domestication of radical propaganda was the Telangana “Dhoom Dham,” the name given to song and dance performances in support of statehood. The earliest of these performances was a modest event organized in the studio of a Hyderabad artist, Laxman Aelay, in 2003. Featuring singers and performers drawn largely from leftist cultural organizations, the Dhoom Dham showcased a musical heritage that was: (a) created by the Naxalite movement; and (b) drew on folk tunes and idioms of the region, as was typical of left propaganda from as early as the days of the Praja Natya Mandal in the 1940s. Dhoom Dhams were relatively autonomous of direct political control but performances were often accompanied by speeches by political leaders and public intellectuals. Soon Dhoom Dham became a distinct genre of political-cultural performance. District and town-level events began to be organized at regular intervals. Non-resident supporters of Telangana organized their own Dhoom Dhams abroad.

The Dhoom Dham is not to be confused with the revival of folk dances and other supposedly “pure” and “traditional” performances that were showcased in events organized by various pro-statehood political formations, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). A widely reported non-political event...
focussing on Telangana culture is the “Alai Balai,” organized every October by the senior BJP leader Bandaru Dattatreya since 2010. The event is claimed to be non-partisan and dedicated to the well-being of the people of the region. Representatives of all political parties and a number of cultural organizations are invited to participate in Alai Balai, which hosts traditional folk performances and serves Telangana cuisine to those gathered (for a report on one of the Alai Balais, see *The Hans of India, 2013*).

Dhoom Dhams are a striking illustration of “disembedding” of songs and idioms that are traceable to folk forms which were mediated by Naxalite propaganda in general, and Gaddar’s individual genius in particular. Propaganda songs in the folk idiom were not only commoditized on a large scale since the early 1990s, but were now circulating with little direct connection with radical parties’ politics or “original” folk forms.

Take, for instance, the case of the (possibly unofficial) TRS propaganda song, “Palle Pallena,” from the professionally produced video album, *Ooru Telangana* (details unknown), which has a wide circulation as a YouTube video.\(^7\) Adopting the Jana Natya Mandali practice of rendering overtly political a refashioned folk idiom, this song has a chorus accompanying the female lead singer who narrates the sad plight of Telangana villages. The visuals reveal a group of villagers, led by the main singer, carrying bundles. Evidently, the group is about to migrate from the village. The singer laments that houses have gone dusty, fields and wells have dried, there are no leaves on the trees and no birds that fly. There is no work or song and the villagers are forced to migrate. Toward the end of the song, as the singers leave the village in a bullock cart, we are shown a group of people with pink TRS flags marching toward the camera from the opposite direction. We then see KCR himself addressing a crowd and the leader of the villagers pointing excitedly in that direction. The tone then changes and the song now calls for meetings in every village to begin a fight to the finish. The singer grabs a pink flag from a bystander and implores the villagers to join the fight to take back the region’s river water. As the group walks toward the camera, presumably toward the group of TRS activists, we see a map of Telangana in the background. There is a dissolve to the image of the map and the caption that is easily identified as one of the slogans of the agitation: “We need our water” (*mana neellu manaku kavali*).

Toward the end of the song, we notice that the tone changes from pathos to defiance as the cause for the misery of the Telangana village is identified (irrigation projects are constructed for Andhra at the cost of Telangana). As is indicated by the YouTube tagline, “Really Heart Touching Song,” the song’s appeal lies in its pathos.
Telangana Sentiment: Emotions and Political Mobilization

While there is nothing explicitly “Naxalite” about the song “Palle Pallena,” what cannot be missed by those familiar with the broader context is the “hotchpotch of leftist popular aesthetics” (to borrow the phrase used by Imke Rajamani in a personal communication). The influences of Naxalite propaganda on this song are manifold. The description of suffering and the dramatic transformation of the oppressed subject into a defiant one is a throwback to the work of Jana Natya Mandali and Arunodaya. But it is to Gaddar we have to turn, in order to properly understand Telangana’s culture turn, which is not only about the growing prominence of song and dance in a political mobilization but also the centrality of sentiment. P.L. Vishweshwer Rao, Chairman of Telangana Intellectual Forum, made the important observation that Telangana movement was “not like any other movement for a separate state in the country. It is a 50-year-old struggle. No other movement has such emotions and passions” (Indo-Asian News Service [IANS], 2011; emphasis added). He was perhaps implicitly comparing Telangana to the agitation that led to the formation of Andhra state in 1953. “Telangana sentiment” is a frequently used English phrase in Telugu newspapers and on television to refer to both emotional outpouring and popular will alike. Sentiment is an integral part of the Telugu lexicon now, in Telangana and residuary/new Andhra Pradesh alike.

The contribution of song and performance traceable to Naxalite movement, to the “emotions and passions” that have over the past decade emerged as the foundations of the movement, is not to be underestimated. Gaddar’s work is striking in this respect. To begin with, it is deeply moving, so much so that it can come across as dangerously sentimental to researchers who take their Adorno seriously. Venkat Rao’s discussion of Gaddar offers valuable insights into what this performer brought to Naxalite propaganda and can be extended to see his significance for contemporary “Telangana culture.” Venkat Rao points out that the lyricist–singer’s work is often centered on death/martyrdom and mourning:

Gaddar addresses the problem of death in the context of what appears to be given: the violent loss, disappearance, or death of loved ones. The work of death or mourning appears in two significant ways in Gaddar’s oral writings. On the one hand, the loss, the absence, and the disappearance make the necessity of song absolutely imperative; the song embodies and lays open the imperative of mourning. On the other, the absence or loss is made more radical by turning this impossible condition into a situation of possibility: precisely this absence enables Gaddar to forge the signatures of the nameless. The mnemonic signatures Gaddar chisels out are effects of an interminable mourning. (Rao, 1999b, p. 360; emphasis added)

Death and mourning have been closely associated with the Telangana movement in the recent past with several hundred suicides being traced to the agitation in the past five years. The sheer scale of the phenomenon in the agitation’s epicenter at Hyderabad, otherwise globally famous for its information technology (IT) industry, has drawn international media attention (see, for example, Polygreen, 2010). Gaddar is widely traveled in India and is famous among radical left circles across the country. However, partly due to Gaddar’s own efforts to make an impact on the Telangana movement, but also the manner in which his earlier work has been re-positioned as a commentary on Telangana and not the oppressed at large, loss and pain are now anchored to the region. In the process, the region itself has come to be marked as the site of “interminable mourning.” The political subject in this struggle, to use another phrase from Venkat Rao’s essay, is “the bearer of incalculable loss” (1999b, p. 368).
Legacies of Film

Even before Gaddar became something of a mascot for the Telangana agitation, Venkat Rao cautioned against assuming that the performer was merely promoting the party line: “Gaddar’s composition—performances are in fact irreducible to party doctrines...however substantial the relations between Gaddar and the party, ends assumed in the party context cannot be projected on the work of song/performance” (1999a, p. 261). Arguably, it is not Gaddar’s work alone but cultural artefacts in general that pose the problem of irreducibility because of the sheer excess of their signification—who can tell how an image or a song will be interpreted? Gaddar is no doubt an auteur and a celebrity, albeit one who is very different from film stars and cricketers. He was never a mere transmitter of his party’s agendas either. How has his idiom, which reconstituted the folk for contemporary social and political commentary, acquired mobility to become the stuff of live performances, television, and YouTube videos?

A good starting point for addressing this question is Telugu cinema, whose contribution to the commoditization of the folk propaganda form that came to be associated with Gaddar is significant. The mediation of Naxalite propaganda by film can be traced to Bhoomikosam (For Land’s Sake; Tilak, 1974), which featured the Bombay star Ashok Kumar (alongside Madras industry actors of considerable standing) and introduced actress-turned-politician Jayaprada to the industry. Tilak was a respected figure in the film industry and spent some years in Bombay as a communist cultural activist before moving to Madras and Telugu cinema. He drew on the vast pool of actors and creative personnel of the Bombay and Madras industries who had worked with Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in the past. The film itself was a tribute to his Naxalite brother and other “martyrs” (amarajeevulu). Bhoomikosam inspired several filmmakers in the years to come and was among the most influential Telugu films of the 1970s.8

After Bhoomikosam, Telugu films made both direct and indirect references to the ongoing Naxalite movement in the state. From the 1980s, coinciding with the spread of the movement in Telangana but without making explicit references to it, a new genre, locally known as erra cinema (red film) or communist cinema, incorporated symbols, concerns, and propaganda associated with the parliamentary left and, simultaneously, depicted violent uprisings against feudal oppressors. In the 1980s, such actions were more characteristic of Naxalites in general, and CPI(ML) People’s War (formed in 1980, an offshoot of the Charu Mazumdar faction of the parent party) in particular, than the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist)—parties to which some key figures associated with the red film were affiliated. A number of red film regulars had Praja Natya Mandal backgrounds.9 Anger and pathos were the driving emotions of the red film: anger at the injustices of the exploitative order and pathos engendered by the slain rebel.

From the late 1980s, even as the occasional red film continued to be made, a modified version of the red film, which made explicit references to the Naxalite movement and also lionized revolutionaries, presenting them as selfless fighters and tragic figures, began to be made. This came to be known as the Naxalite film (used interchangeably with erra cinema and communist cinema; see Images 2 and 3). Typically, in the Naxalite film, armed squads of Naxalites are seen performing vigilante actions against landlords, corrupt police officials, or politicians and indulging in a variety of populist actions. However, these films were not authorized by Naxalite parties and were often severely criticized by intellectuals affiliated to them.

Credit for creating the genre goes to R. Narayanamurthy, actor, director, and producer of a majority of Naxalite films (Murari, n.d., pp. 270–273). His efforts earned him the honorific title, “People’s Star.” The genre was launched with Ardharatri Swatantram (Freedom at Midnight; Narayanamurthy, 1986). K. Balaji (1999) notes that this was the first Telugu film to have used the term Annalu (older brothers, commonly used to refer to Naxalites, members of armed squads in particular). Further, the film features
a singer–revolutionary who was unmistakably modeled on Gaddar. The role was played by T. Krishna, the director of some landmark early 1980s red films. The figure of the singing revolutionary, played by other actors, would frequently reappear till he became a regular feature of the Naxalite film.

Gaddar had made an appearance in *Maa Bhoomi* (Our Land; Ghosh, 1979), a film on the Telangana uprising (1948–1952), singing the anti-Nizam song, “Bandenaka Bandigatti.” This film was produced by B. Narsing Rao. From *Lal Salam* (Red Salute, 1992), Narayanamurthy’s screen persona was characterized by a strikingly melodramatic style of acting and direct address to the camera that recalled stage performances. He frequently and liberally mimicked, or rather quoted, Gaddar’s stage gestures and performance style.

The Naxalite film made overt references to the Naxalite movement, which had come to be identified with the Telangana region in the post-Emergency period. Even the less successful 1990s films of Narayanamurthy, apparently either broke even or earned modest profits in Telangana (*Jyothichitra*, December 4, 1998, p. 18). Today, the Naxalite film is the one genre of Telugu cinema that has widespread acceptance among pro-statehood activists. This minor genre, virtually unknown outside Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, has had a fascinating political history—it appropriated radical propaganda and served as a vehicle for emerging or established celebrity politicians.

Most of Narayanamurthy’s 1990s films were shot in Coastal Andhra and used the Telangana dialect inconsistently, but this did not come in the way of their popularity in Telangana. The turning point of what was till then a relatively insignificant genre—made and circulated on the fringes of the film
industry—was the success of *Erra Sainyam* (Red Army; Narayanamurthy, 1995b) beyond Telangana. The film proved to be one of the biggest box office hits in 1995 and attracted the industry’s big stars, filmmakers, and production houses to the one-man cottage industry that was the Naxalite film. One of the early movers was Dasari Narayana Rao, the director of over 100 films, who would go on to become a union minister in the United Progressive Alliance government in 2004. Dasari cast Narayanamurthy, who had earlier worked as his assistant, in the lead in *Orey Rickshaw* (Hey You! Rickshaw, Narayana Rao, 1995). The film proved to be commercially successful. The senior director then made *Osey Ramulamma* (Hey You! Ramulamma; Narayana Rao, 1997), the most famous Naxalite film ever, featuring Vijayashanthi in the lead. In this film, Dasari himself played a Gaddar-like revolutionary singer. As legend has it, people from far-flung Telangana villages hired tractors and trucks to travel to cinema halls screening the film. This film’s popularity played no small part in the crossover of Vijayashanthi into politics, first, as an active campaigner for the BJP and more recently, for Telangana’s statehood.

The appearance of the singer–revolutionary in the Naxalite film from the 1980s was accompanied by another act of appropriation: the genre liberally adapted the tunes and lyrics of popular Jana Natya Mandali and Arunodaya songs. Needless to add, these tunes were, in turn, drawn from or fashioned after folk tunes. A critical review of *Adavilo Anna* (The Brother in the Forest; Gopal, 1997) condemned the trend of stealing lyrics and tunes of revolutionary songs. Notably, the review claimed that the trend had increased in the past decade—more or less coinciding with the emergence of the Naxalite film (Azad, 1997, p. 51). It is worth pointing out that the lead actor and producer of *Adavilo Anna* not only nurtured political ambitions throughout the 1990s but was also a Rajya Sabha member representing Telugu Desam Party (TDP) when he played a student-turned-Naxalite in the film.

Film critics and industry observers are of the unanimous opinion that the genre’s adaptation of Naxalite propaganda songs played a big role in its popularity, particularly in Telangana where these songs were already familiar. Audio cassettes of Gaddar and other radical cultural activists were circulating widely from roughly 1990, when the ban on People’s War was temporarily lifted. They were sold in shops as well as the venues of public meetings organized by the radical left parties and their front organizations. It was this market segment—created by political movements—that the Naxalite film was tapping into, even as it extended the segment to new regions and consumers. According to a fan website, *Osey Ramulamma* had the second highest audio sales in the Telugu industry till 2009. This is an unverified claim, but it nevertheless reflects the perception that the film’s audio was very successful indeed.

The genre’s adaptation or appropriation of Naxalite music was not limited to borrowing songs that were already popular. Major cultural activists of the radical left, including Gaddar and the older Jana Natya Mandali singer, Vangapandu Prasada Rao, were commissioned to write new songs. The practice of commissioning radical left singers and poets to write for films was common among producers of the early 1980s red films as well. The popularity of songs scripted by Gaddar in *Orey Rickshaw* was noted by a reviewer in a radical journal (Premchand, 1996, p. 29). The genre also introduced writers who had radical left activist, or family, backgrounds. Most notable of the younger writers is Suddala Ashok Teja, son of Suddala Hanumanthu of the Telangana armed uprising vintage. Ashok Teja went on to become one of the leading lyricists of the Telugu industry. So intimate was the link between the Naxalite film and revolutionary cultural activists that CPI(ML) People’s War cited work for commercial films as one of the reasons for suspending Gaddar from the party in 1996.

The evolution of the Naxalite film into what we can call the “Telangana” film, targeting a regional market and, inter alia, explicit in its support to statehood, is evident from the work of Narayanamurthy as well as N. Shankar, who too was associated with the mother genre (Naxalite film) in the 1990s. Both directors publicly declared their support for Telangana’s statehood. Narayanamurthy made two Telangana
films, *Veera Telangana* (Heroic Telangana, 2010) and *Poru Telangana* (The Struggle for Telangana, 2011). Shankar began his career with two Naxalite films, *Encounter* (1997), which starred Krishna, the 1970s superstar who joined the Congress (I) and was elected to the Parliament in 1984, and *Sriramulayya* (1998), based on the life of the Naxalite leader Paritala Srimululu and featuring Mohan Babu of *Adavilo Anna* fame. In his *Jai Bolo Telangana* (Hail Telangana, 2011), Shankar had Gaddar playing himself and singing “Podustunna Poddu” (more about this song later, see Image 4). An impressive line-up of public figures is associated with this film, flagging the support for Telangana state formation from parties across the political spectrum. The television actress-turned-BJP member, Smriti Irani (currently Minister for Human Resource Development), was cast in a key role (see Image 5). KCR, Vimalakka, Deshpethi Srinivas (poet and lyricist), and Mallepally Laxmaiah (who established the pro-Telangana television channel, HMTV) were also seen in the film. KCR was credited with the lyrics of the song, “Garadi Chestundru.” Goreti Venkanna and Nandini Siddareddy (Manjira Rachayitala Sangham), known supporters of Telangana’s statehood, were among the film’s lyricists, as was Sudala Ashok Teja, who by then was a much sought-after film lyricist. Interestingly, while Smriti Irani’s character was critical for the story, the film remained largely indifferent to BJP’s Hindu majoritarian ideology and that party’s role in the ongoing Telangana agitation. Unlike Gaddar and other public figures who played themselves in the film, Irani did not speak for the BJP so much as flag the need for a united front for Telangana, cutting across political formations. Like Narayananamurthy’s work, *Jai Bolo Telangana* too claimed the Naxalite movement as a “Telangana” legacy.
After Cinema

The Naxalite film demonstrated that leftist propaganda could be harnessed to produce and market hybrid musical-entertainment forms for the masses and these could, apparently, exist independently of a direct link with Naxalite politics. By the time the first Dhoom Dham performance was held in 2003, the popularity of Gaddar, the individual, and the Jana Natya Mandali/Arunodaya idiom in Telangana was hardly in doubt. Naxalite film had had some role to play in increasing its visibility and popularity alike. Simultaneously, via the Dhoom Dham, there was a dispersal of yet another hybrid of left propaganda, initially as live stage performances. Dhoom Dham performances and artistes became television content from around 2009, when that medium too was drawn into the battle for Telangana (see Images 6, 7 and 8).

Padmaja Shaw (2014) notes that three pro-statehood channels were launched from Hyderabad in 2009 alone, when the movement intensified on the ground. The immediate cause for the late 2009 upsurge was the hunger strike by KCR from November 29, 2009 and the subsequent announcement by the then Minister for Home Affairs, Government of India (on December 9, 2009), that Telangana state would be formed. On the ground, from November 2009, the spate of suicides in support of statehood added a sense of urgency to the prolonged mobilization and also led to a spurt in the production of print and audio-visual forms in support of statehood.

On Telugu satellite television, Dhoom Dham came to refer to a genre of folk performance which did not make explicit references to politics. A female anchor with the screen name Racha Ramulamma (Ramya Krishna, notice the reference to Osey Ramulamma), speaking in a Telangana dialect, became the host of a new reality show titled Teenmaar Dhoom Dham (Singh, 2013). No doubt, this and other developments pointing to the revival and reinvention of folk forms were deeply political because the movement was now playing out a classic nationalist strategy of reinventing tradition, complete with a presiding Mother Goddess.

Even as Naxalite propaganda transmogrified into folk revival on and for television, access to propaganda itself increased for two reasons. First, its circulation was no longer curtailed by fear of police repression on consumers after the suppression of Maoism in the state. Second, the digitization of audio and video tapes and sharing of content.
on Web 2.0 platforms had the effect of assembling a new archive of songs as well as ephemeral live performances. Propaganda was thus rendered mobile by both political and technological contexts and could now travel well beyond its already impressive publics. Much of the access even to “pure” Naxalite propaganda was mediated by pro-statehood users who turned to Web 2.0 platforms in significant numbers after 2009. YouTube emerged as an important platform for users who found themselves in a period of heightened political activity. YouTube uploads that are either tagged as Telangana by users or pop up in searches related to Telangana include a fair share of content that is directly drawn from television. Clips of news coverage of events, interviews with Telangana leaders, and performances by Gaddar, Vimalakka but also Dhoom Dham participants are among the most preferred uploads. Political scientist H. Srikanth flags the high visibility of Telangana-related content on old and new media platforms when he says (disapprovingly), “Easy access to the internet, the growth of online social networks and newspapers, the popularity of websites such as YouTube, and the proliferation of 24×7 television news channels have come in handy for the politicians and ideologues of Telangana” (2013, p. 41).

Content generated by leftist cultural organizations has found favour with pro-statehood YouTube users, not the least because of the frequent references to Telangana that feature on it. Additionally, entire bodies of work—regardless of actual authorship or content of individual songs—are claimed as “Telangana songs.” Such content includes entire red or Naxalite films to songs saluting the red flag to processions of peasants and workers (formulaic elements from the early 1980s red film) to, understandably, those that make explicit references to the region.

Accompanying this dispersal—online and offline—is a reworking of the original. Depoliticization is not quite an accurate description of the process, for the dispersal is avowedly in the service of a political mobilization. A particularly telling reworking of Gaddar’s work is a video in which “Podustunna Poddu” from the film Jai Bolo Telangana plays to an assortment of visuals of Michael Jackson from his music videos.16 Between Naxalite propaganda and the Michael Jackson video on YouTube, we have a broad spectrum of media-cultural forms: films, recorded music, live performances, television, and user-generated content. The links of individual artefacts/commodities with Naxalite politics are either non-existent or, at best, tenuous. What then do we make of the hypervisibility of the propaganda and personalities, some of whom continue to be associated with the Naxalite movement? What disciplinary competencies and histories throw light on this curious development?

Gaddar-effect

At issue here is not the prominence of active and lapsed Naxalite cultural activists in the Telangana movement but what I would like to call the “Gaddar-effect,” as a tribute to the man who played no small
role in popularizing the idiom that is now everywhere. While the Naxalite film’s role in pushing propaganda well beyond the cultural wings of Maoist parties is notable, the larger phenomenon has remarkable parallels with the fate of the Indian cinema from the late twentieth century. For that reason, it becomes all the more interesting for students of cinema.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s notion of the “cinema-effect” is a useful starting point for understanding the problem at hand. The cinema-effect is the substitution of the celluloid medium and the film narrative by “extracinematic productions of a particular kind of symbolic form deriving from what was once filmic content” (Rajadhyaksha, 2009, p. 100). The most visible sign of this process is to be found in what Rajadhyaksha terms the “Bollywoodization of Indian cinema”: cinema, once a self-standing entertainment form and industry, is transformed into a relatively minor component of a cultural industry whose constituents include music, television, fashion, food and tourism industries (Rajadhyaksha, 2009, pp. 51–83). This transformation in the 1990s:

coincides with a widespread social tendency towards evoking film mainly for the purposes of re-presentation, re-definition or even evisceration of the cinema: of reprocessing the cinema in order eventually, to make it available for numerous and varied uses primarily outside the movie theatre (Rajadhyaksha, 2009, pp. 99–100)

Replace cinema and cinematic with Maoist propaganda and we have a reasonably accurate description of the Gaddar-effect in Telangana. Naxalite propaganda is invoked and quoted but the end product need not be directly related either to Naxalism or even to propaganda. In this instance, neither the “star” or icon (Gaddar), nor the form (propaganda), is anchored to the original function.

The cultural turn of the Telangana movement has opened a window on the linkage between popular culture and politics in the present time. The key development, traceable in this part of the country to NTR’s election in 1983, is the mediation of political participation by “informational” and other cultural commodities, including cinema. In the early years of sound, low literacy rates and low per capita attendance of cinema in India limited the role of newspapers and films respectively. In the post-Emergency period, for a variety of reasons, including rising levels of literacy, availability of new printing technology, and localization of content, the reach of newspapers expanded rapidly (Jeffrey, 2010). Relatively less known was the expansion of the market for cinema in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh alike after state formation in 1956. M.G. Ramachandran’s election as Chief Minister in 1977 coincided with a sharp rise in film production in Tamil and Telugu in Madras in the late 1970s (for production figures, see Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999, pp. 31–32). Cinema screens in Andhra Pradesh increased from 892 in 1975 to 1,904 in 1980 and would peak at 3,057 in 1995 (Srinivas, 2013, p. 35). NTR’s decision to contest the 1983 election was thus preceded by the massive expansion in the film industry across all three regions of undivided Andhra Pradesh.

The role played by the Telugu newspaper, Eenadu, in NTR’s successful election campaign has drawn the attention of several researchers, including Jeffrey (1997, 2010). The Eenadu story is a clear pointer of the symbiotic relationship between the consumption of cultural commodities and political mobilization. The newspaper was established in 1974 and, according to Jeffrey, it did more than just support NTR’s campaign: “Eenadu and its proprietor Ramoji Rao played a major role in creating the Telugu Desam Party…The newspaper—and its rivals—created the climate in which millions of Telugus came to share a sense that Telugu culture was suffering indignities that required a new political party to rectify” (2010, p. 77; emphasis added). Eenadu’s circulation increased in the last quarter of 1982, when the newspaper openly supported NTR and adopted a variety of techniques to deride the ruling Congress (I). As Jeffrey himself notes, politics has always been good for the newspaper business across the world. In 1989, it was the turn of the audio and video cassettes to play “a significant partisan role” (Manuel, 1993, p. 243).
Today, this is exactly what is being said about Indian television. Evidently, the informational/cultural commodity stands between the party and voter. And the medium is anything but transparent.

When we shift our focus to modes of engagement with cultural commodities that have gone digital and/or online, it appears at first glance that Gaddar is incidental to the emerging aesthetic of political participation, which is in equal parts consumption and re-transmission (in turn determined by its political and technological contexts). Like the cinema in cinema-effect, has Gaddar been eviscerated? Were radical performers found objects and readymades for an already existing political project?

The cultural turn was not just about singers on the political platform. The defining term of the most intense phase of the agitation (from 2009) is “Telangana sentiment.” In its Telugu usage, the phrase Telangana sentiment connotes the expression of popular will that brooks no challenge. The region’s people have spoken and in a democracy that counts for something. Anger and pathos are the emotions that drove the movement. The literature, the speeches, and songs offer ample evidence of this. These, let us not forget, are also the signature emotions of red genres of Telugu cinema.

Gaddar and his radical left colleagues are anything but incidental to the dispersal of propaganda as mass culture. The idioms they had assembled and perfected was saturated with affect. The emotions of the Telangana movement are directly traceable to Naxalite propaganda. The Naxalite film amplified affect, rendering it into pure melodrama which, in the genre, was quite literally all sound and fury.

Gaddar (1992) used the phrase taragani gani (inexhaustible mine) to describe people’s cultural forms that revolutionary practice drew on. The popular is thus the domain of raw materials, resources. Gaddar is the creator of the lost original that now circulates in multiple morphed versions. Nevertheless, Gaddar performs an author function, authenticating cultural commodities. His name is the tag on song and image that offers some protection against the terror of uncertain signs, from the digital object becoming completely decontextualized; or a sign of the opening up of multiple possibilities by the transcendence of an earlier (cinematic) form of indexicality—a process that Ravi Vasudevan (2010, p. 284) draws attention to in his discussion of digital simulation. Venkat Rao (2006, p. 212) argues that Gaddar’s idiom “resists translation” and is “impossible to render into English.” Untranslatability has not rendered the idiom immobile.

**Conclusion**

Gaddar’s makeover as a mass cultural icon was a part of a larger context in which “regional politics” was no longer predicated on the capacity of language to form/unify political communities. On the contrary, on both sides of the Telangana divide were Telugu-language speakers, locked in an increasingly bitter contest that went far beyond the uncivil behavior of elected representatives that created a splash on national television. Communist and Maoist formations, which were a significant presence in the territories that became Telangana, had become increasingly marginal politically in pre-bifurcation Andhra Pradesh. Their decline coincided with the passing of the celluloid era in what was once the largest market for cinema. Media consumption, for its part, came to be overdetermined by the digital turn which transformed all analogue forms into free-floating content. Political iconicity became unanchored from its original moorings to rally publics that may have had little use or interest in the political leanings of the icon. The unity of the mass was provisional and its glue was Telangana sentiment.

Neither the end of language politics nor the post-celluloid turn of cinema suggests that mass mobilization is being replaced by consumption of content. A question thrown up by my material and its contexts of production and circulation is how the examination of media consumption might help us
understand today’s mass politics. The youths on the streets are, among other things, audiences. The mobilized subject is a consumer and, at times, a producer of content too. What we are witnessing is not the evisceration of the original or the death of the cinema but the transition to a new situation and the emergence of new locations and modes of publicness.

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Notes

1. This and other parallels between the movement for a separate Andhra state in the 1950s and the Telangana movement over the past decade will remain unexplored in this article for reasons of focus and space. I have discussed cinema’s importance for Andhra Pradesh from the 1950s at some length elsewhere (Srinivas, 2013, pp. 51–108).
2. Krishna Chaitanya Allam, a pro-statehood YouTube user, states that till late 2009, there wasn’t much Telangana-related activity on YouTube (email to the author, dated 16 February 2014).
3. For example, the program on Vimalakka aired on April 7, 2013 by TV5 News, titled “Mee Patanai Vastunna,” is available on the television network’s YouTube channel. Retrieved August 29, 2015, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5swGlbGq28
4. A “Gaddar Special” episode too was aired on TV5 News. Retrieved August 29, 2015, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_hEJyYxKxI0
5. A brief report on Gaddar’s press conference in the run up to the event is available on http://great-telangana.blogspot.in/2008/02/gaddar-calls-peoples-movement-for.html (Retrieved August 29, 2015)
6. See, for example, the report on the Dhoom Dham in Dubai by a pro-Telangana website, http://www.ourtelangana.com/content/dhoom-dham-dubai (Retrieved August 29, 2015). The event was held on 22 January 2010. The comments section of the webpage shows that a television reporter promptly contacted the website for a video of the event for airing it on the news channel TV9.
7. One of the many uploads is by the user naagesh1984, with the title “Telangana Song Really Heart Touching Song.” Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gElGtxtFAzg; published on 9 July 2010; Retrieved August 29, 2015.
8. For a detailed discussion of the film and its lasting influence on Telugu cinema, see Srinivas (2013, pp. 206–215).
9. For more on the 1980s red films and their significance, see Srinivas (2013, pp. 360–384).
10. “Errajenda Errajenda,” an adaptation of the Jana Natya Mandali song for the film Cheemala Dandu (Army of Ants; Narayananmurthy, 1995a), is listed under the category of “Top Telangana Songs” in the pro-Telangana website, telanganadosti.com. Interestingly, the lyrics of this song do not make any references to Telangana. Retrieved August 29, 2015, from http://www.telanganadosti.com/player/songs/Telangana%20Songs/ERRAJENDA%20ERRAJENDA.mp3. Also found on the website are songs by Gaddar, Vimalakka, and Goreti Venkanna.
11. Posted by srinivasmahima on 20 February 2009. Retrieved from http://nagfans.com/forum/showthread.php/17889-highest-audio-sales
12. Shanker (n.d.) states that Gaddar was suspended for “amassing huge wealth using the militant outfit’s name.” The actions cited by the party included the establishment of a private school on three acres of land and, in the journalist’s words, “writing lyrics for Telugu films made on revolutionary themes.”

13. The film was produced by TDP leader Paritala Ravi, the son of the Naxalite leader Paritala Sriramulu, on whose life the story is purportedly based. In November 1997, 23 people died in a car bomb attack on Ravi after the ceremonial commencement of production. Ravi and Mohan Babu escaped with minor injuries (Rediff on the Net, 1997).

14. TRS has repeatedly claimed that the turning point in the movement for statehood was KCR’s fast. See Special Correspondent (2013) for an elaboration of the claim.

15. Observations on the role of the Internet and Web 2.0 platforms are partly based on an email communication from Krishna Chaitanya Allam, dated 16 February 2014. Allam, whose YouTube user name is Kris Allam, was among the earliest upholders of videos in support of the statehood demand. He was on YouTube from February 2007 but it was only in late 2009—clearly in response to the intensification of the movement around this time—that he began uploading content related to Telangana. He points out that when he started, there wasn’t much “online voice” in support of Telangana. His channel currently has 161 videos, including the feature film Maa Bhoomi. Retrieved August 29, 2015, from https://www.youtube.com/user/krishnaallam

16. The video in question is titled “Podustunna Poddumeeda song by michael jackson” and was uploaded by a user with the handle krishnakishore. Retrieved August 29, 2015, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVMiad5wDHM

17. For a detailed discussion of Eenadu’s techniques, see Maheswari (1999) and Srinivas (2013, pp. 305–360).

18. See, for example, the collection of poems titled Quit Telangana, published by Singidi Rachayitala Sangham (2011). One of the poems, addressed to the opponents of Telangana statehood, is titled “Bastards” and ends with the line (in English), “Bastards, go to hell.”

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