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Devotion and horror in a women's genre: exploring subalternity in cinema

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This article is an exploration of the shifting contours of subalternity and religion in popular South Indian cinema, more specifically within the subgenre of the devotional (*bhakti*) film, namely goddess films. Fierce lower-caste goddesses who were either reviled or made the subject of reform in the cinema of the first two decades after independence moved centre-stage in a series of fairly popular low-budget Tamil and Telugu women's melodramas in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s this subaltern goddess made a brief but spectacular bid for mainstream success. This shift in the representation of the goddess is accompanied by a shift in the generic nature of the devotional film too. Moving slightly away from the melodramatic mode where tragedy was the predominant emotion, the *bhakti* film of the

nineties begins to display, in addition, features of the horror genre. In this article, I trace these thematic and generic shifts and argue that the question of caste is crucial to this shift. Liberal secularism in modern India was premised on the desire to create national citizens who transcend caste and religious identities. The parallel project of Hindu nationalism too had to erase caste in order to establish Hinduism as a separate and homogeneous religion of the majority. Caste is indeed the horrifying abjection that had to be marked, cordoned off and exorcised or, alternatively, co-opted in order for the Hindu patriarchal social order to be preserved. I argue that the devotional film as much as the early mythologicals represents a struggle over the *casted* female subject's citizenship in the nation and, by extension, a struggle over the form of the social itself. However, the filmic manifestations and explorations of these crises offer us no neat resolutions. Rather, they map ongoing struggles and are particular attempts at addressing current impasses and re-articulations. Close attention to filmic narrative, development of genres and the ways in which cinematic technology transforms subaltern performative traditions and myths will allow us to trace the new frames into which they are inserted as well as the subversive *and* assimilative work that they perform.

Does the goddess have a caste?

The goddess occupies a liminal space in the Hindu tradition – she stands at the threshold of Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic traditions, Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions.[1] Focusing on aspects of women's religiosity, both Kalpana Ram's study of possession among rural Tamil women[2] and V. Vasantalakshmi's work on goddess cults in Andhra Pradesh,[3] show that several of the lower-caste goddess cults exhibit a continuum between woman and goddess. In rural south India there are several local legends about women (mostly belonging to *sudra* or intermediary castes) who were deified as goddesses after their death. As Vasantalakshmi points out, at least half of these stories describe a conflict involving control over the woman's sexuality. Many women died after an actual or attempted rape, or as a result of sexual harassment of some kind. Others died in premarital pregnancy, or following accusations of extra-marital pregnancy.[4]

Ram maintains that in the case of the village goddesses the *bhakti* mode alone cannot adequately represent the nature of the goddess and the relationship between her and the devotees. She argues,

The [subaltern] religious cults devoted to goddesses such as Icakki and Muttumari depend centrally, not on expressions of love by the goddess, but on direct possession of their devotees. Unlike Sanskritic deities these goddesses are not characterized by any clear distinction, let alone a polarity, between auspicious power and demonic power.[5]

However, it was not until the 1970s that non-Sanskritic, subaltern goddesses could make their appearance on the Telugu screen without being made the object of reform, but simply as powerful goddesses who are feared and revered. One must hasten to add that, while cinematic representations often echo developments in social and political realms, those resonances are mediated in contingent and unpredictable ways, as will become evident in this essay.

The post-seventies goddess film and its B-movie status

By the late seventies in Telugu, the *bhakti* film, no longer a mainstream genre, continued to survive nevertheless as a low budget B genre whose narrative, set in modern times, centred on a powerful local goddess and a female devotee. Many of these films were technically poor with weak screenplays and poorly conceived *mises en scene*. Most characters were types without much depth and the style was mostly frontal with little effort at creating the realist frame that would lend them depth and plausibility. The films addressed a primarily lower-middle-class female audience and began to be exhibited most commonly during the 11 am late-morning show that was popular with this section of the film-viewing public.

In this new avatar of the *bhakti* genre, the female devotee was usually a long-suffering wife who was oppressed either by the husband or his family and the goddess comes to her rescue. However, the presence of the goddess in itself is not to be taken as a sign of women's empowerment or of the subaltern nature of the film; rather, we ought to examine who mobilises the goddess, in what context and towards what end.[6] Quite distinct from early reformist devotionals and even later social films in Telugu, these new goddess films did not seek to reform or convert the masses of believers into modern reformed or sceptical subjects. In fact, there is no patriarchal figure who is the representative of modernity and reason. Instead, at the centre of the narrative is a female devotee whose sceptical husband or lover is usually forced by the narrative to accept the limitations of his belief in reason. The goddess takes the place of the narrative agent and moves the narrative forward to proclaim her own glory and power. Further unlike the 1950s films like *Sati Savitri* (1953), *Nagula Chavithi* (1956), *Sati Anasuya* (1957), and *Sati Sumathi* (1967) in which the goddess's claims to sovereignty are rendered problematic and untenable, in the 1990s goddess films she remains more or less unchallenged. In the earlier films, the goddesses are pitted against the *sati* figures – there is a splitting of the Woman into powerful and terrifying goddess who has no male consort and a woman whose prior subordination to husband secures her extraordinary powers as *sati*. Contrary to this, the *sati*–goddess relationship is now akin to a mother–daughter relationship.

Furthermore, I suspect these films were considered B films, not simply because of their poor aesthetic quality, but precisely because they had no charismatic male star or a reformist citizen, either male or female, at the centre of the narrative. The narrative is not organised around such a figure, nor is it refracted through his or her point of view. The films often employ the style of *vrata kathas*,[7] where episodes depicting the glory of a particular deity or a pilgrimage shrine are dramatised and the experiences of different devotees are narrated in loosely strung dramatic episodes. The only frame that unites them is the 'positivity' of the deity or the temple itself as it exists in contemporary times. It is not surprising therefore that documentary footage of the shrine and authoritative voice-overs often frame and punctuate the narratives. Unmediated by the gaze of the male star or the reforming *sati* figure who anchored earlier narratives, these films were often characterised as cheap, exploitative and irresponsible. But these are precisely the reasons that make these 'minor' genres interesting.

Cinematic mediations of subaltern corporeal schemas

In the year 1995, however, when this genre seemed consigned to an irredeemable B status, came a surprisingly well-made film, *Ammoru* (Kodi Ramakrishna), which became a major mainstream success, attracting not only women viewers but the general film-going public as well. Its cast included some well-known actors whose status was further consolidated with the success of the film. Its plot was fairly gripping and coherent and most importantly, it boasted some amazing special effects that were achieved with newly available computer generated graphics and technicians from Hollywood (see fig. 1). Even a leading director like Ramgopal Varma, famous for his political thrillers and horror films, was said to have been impressed with the film's level of technical excellence. S.V. Srinivas has recently argued that *Ammoru* and films that followed it succeeded in showcasing the possibilities of new cinematic technologies which were subsequently adopted in more mainstream genres featuring male stars.[8]



Figure 1.

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Computer generated special effects in *Ammoru* (1995).

Ram, whose work I have referred to, has recently written a very important and insightful article about *Ammoru* and other films in this genre.[9] Examining the Tamil versions of these films, which are usually made in either Telugu or Tamil and later dubbed into the other language, she rightly points to the affinities between the goddess they portray and the goddesses who are worshipped and feared by lower-caste rural women in South India. Drawing upon her own earlier work, Ram begins her essay by

presenting three narratives drawn from three different fields: a dalit woman's narrative collected in the course of her earlier ethnography, a narrative from a folklore performance, and the third from a recent goddess film. Deliberately obscuring the different sources of these narratives, she points to the striking similarities they share. Her aim is to demonstrate the ways in which certain fundamental 'cultural schemas' that characterise the subaltern south Indian world are transposed across different media. She argues,

what allows for these transpositions to occur in the first place is the existence of certain basic cultural schemas, in Bourdieu's sense of the term. The schemas entail a conjunction of elements at once more basic, and also more impoverished, than any of their actual realisations, whether in cinema, or in ritual performance or in understandings of life itself. Pared back, the relevant schema probably consists of no more than a few relational pairs that are transposed on to one another according to the particular situation at hand: woman/man, suffering/power, death/birth, human/divine, and woman/goddess. Yet by virtue of being shared, schemas, impoverished as they are, or more accurately, precisely because of their impoverished quality, are able to connect different fields of practice, creating pathways whereby each field is able to lend its own power and meanings to the others. ...

These relational pairs are easily mistaken for structuralist cognitive oppositions. But what travels from one field to another are not simply cognitive or linguistic categories, but embodied, corporeal schemas.[10]

Ram's point about the embodied, corporeal nature of cultural schemas is especially perceptive. However, I wonder if in paying attention to the basic even if impoverished cultural schemas, we might miss out on the crucial ways in which cinema embeds these in altogether new narratives and frameworks. In fleshing out these bare cultural schemas, what new forms and new contours does cinema render them into? Further, in these transpositions – humanly and technologically mediated – shouldn't we pay equal attention to the changes being made, even as we keep in sight those aspects that remain the same. In what specific ways does the cinematic medium transform mythic material? What are the ways in which it reshapes modes of viewing and hearing that are cultivated in the context of ritual and folk performative traditions or dramatic performances that draw on religious traditions?

Hence, while there are insights that I draw from Ram's work, the emphasis and accent I wish to place upon them is quite different. In what follows, using the example of *Ammoru*, which, as Ram herself notes, is much closer than most other films in this genre 'to the ritual depth of the tragic mode in South Indian culture', I examine how the film represents the subaltern goddess and her principal female devotee. I also turn to feminist film theory to explore the specific work of cinema.

The work of cinema: subversion or assimilation?

The success of *Ammoru* suggests that a complex process of subversion *and* assimilation is at work

in relation to the goddess. There is a tension in the film between the desire for assimilation of the village goddess to the great goddess tradition in Hinduism *and* a desire to retain her uniqueness as a village and lower-caste deity who stands outside of, or in tension with, the Hindu tradition. The goddess in *Ammoru* is definitely not a Sanskrit goddess and this is indicated by the name *ammoru*, a lower-caste rendering of *ammavaru*, i.e. *amma* (mother) with the honorific upper-caste suffix *varu*. Furthermore, the goddess is represented in the film through the most rudimentary iconic depiction, a turmeric smeared stone fixed with silver eyes and a silver tongue (see fig. 2). In the song that accompanies the credit sequence we are told that the goddess is none other than *Adi-sakti* and *Parasakti*, both of which names describe the goddess as the originary and ultimate power. Interestingly, the idol is shown with rapid intercuts of popular calendar images of Durga and Kali besides the goddess herself (played by Ramya Krishna). As her popularity grows she acquires a Brahmin priest, an impressive temple structure and a growing body of devotees with female devotees representing a majority. There are scenes of *anna danam* (distribution of food) and some devotees (mostly male) even bring hens and goats as sacrificial offerings. While earlier films, both devotional and social, have always condemned this practice, the film does not adopt a reformist attitude towards it, but simply records it as an important part of goddess worship. This is indeed a significant departure. [11] There are also scenes of women getting possessed by the power of the goddess.



Figure 2.

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The subaltern goddess makes an appearance in *Ammoru* (1995).

The narrative is inscribed within the boundaries of the village in an important way and this is a feature common to most goddess films. However, both the goddess and the female devotee, Bhavani

(Soundarya) are indeed both literally and symbolically restrained from moving out. Both exhibit an inability to cross borders. The segment preceding the title sequence of the film shows us how the goddess is obliged to stay in the village because of a promise made to her devotee. Bhavani, the heroine of the film, loses her passport on the eve of her departure to America and is forced to stay behind in the village while her husband leaves the country.

However, while the goddess remains a lower-caste deity, Bhavani performs the part of an upper-caste devotee throughout the film despite her lowly origins – she is an orphan whose caste identity is unknown. Her performance of devoutness is that of an upper-caste wife and the *vratam* is the primary ritual mode she adopts. Her relationship to the goddess, too, is cast in an upper-caste *bhakti* mode. She speaks to the goddess as a daughter. The goddess too speaks to her in the form of an adolescent girl but never possesses her as she does her other devotees. There are no scenes of ecstatic possession, no singing and dancing by Bhavani at any point in the film. Interestingly enough, it is the goddess who gets ecstatic and joins heartily in the singing and dancing at the feast that is organised for her pleasure. Bhavani remains a devout, even indulgent spectator to this scene. In this sense, she seems untouched by the corporeal schemas of lower-caste devotional practices in which direct possession by the deity is a central feature.

Furthermore, elements of the old reformist citizen figure of the *sati* seem to persist through the character of Bhavani. In the film a promise made to Bhavani contains the destructive powers of the goddess and reins her in. She cannot appear at will, but has to be ritually beckoned by the *sati* thus rendering her narrative agency conditional upon her devotee's will. That is why the film pictures the goddess in different guises as a wilful adolescent girl, as a middle-aged woman and as impetuous goddess. Bhavani, the devotee, however, remains the ever-suffering wife who is willing to sacrifice her own interests in order to please her husband's family.

Embodied suffering and the woman's *Bhakti* film

Nevertheless, the troubled issues of sexuality and fertility that play such an important role in rural and urban poor women's lives, as both Ram and Vasantalakshmi demonstrate, are themes that animate the majority of goddess films. Pregnancy, abortions and the difficulties of the birthing process are repeatedly thematised in many of these films. *Devi* (Kodi Ramakrishna, 1999), *Mahachandi* (Bharati Kannan, 2002) and *Devi Nagamma* (Azhahari, 2002) are a few examples. Another familiar theme is women's suffering at the hands of an oppressive patriarchal family structure. In *Ammoru*, all the obstacles and difficulties that come Bhavani's way are created by her husband's extended family in the absence of her husband. The dispute is also a typical one, a quarrel over the family's feudal wealth. The husband's family poison a pregnant Bhavani in order to induce a miscarriage, but the goddess takes in the poison herself and saves the unborn child. Following this the family inflicts terrible physical violence upon her and nearly kills her. But once again the goddess makes an appearance just in time and saves Bhavani and the child by taking on the role of a midwife. In one of the film's impressive special effect scenes, the goddess (as young girl) multiplies herself five times over to perform simultaneously the different chores of a midwife.

In an insightful essay titled 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess', the film theorist Linda Williams

identifies three genres in American cinema – the classic woman's melodrama, the horror film and the pornographic film – as being characterised by an excess.[12] She describes them as exemplifying 'a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to more "dominant" modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative'. She says that it is possible to assimilate all these genres under the general rubric of melodrama which had been described as having attributes like 'spectacle, episodic presentation, or dependence on coincidence'. Indeed much of Indian cinema has been criticised for precisely these reasons. She goes on to name these 'body genres' because in all three there is a sensational display of the body, usually the female body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion. Williams further argues that 'what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in almost involuntary emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female'. And indeed, the success of these genres is 'measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen'. Williams also asserts that there 'is an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement. We feel manipulated by these texts – too viscerally manipulated by the text in specifically gendered ways.'[13]

As many scholars of Indian cinema have pointed out, genre distinctions and developments in Indian cinema do not follow the logic of genre in Western cinema and I am by no means suggesting that American genre theory can be adopted unproblematically to 'explain' south Indian film genres. Nevertheless, there are interesting resonances that Williams's analysis has for thinking about Telugu and Tamil goddess films. A range of embodied responses have characterised the practice of watching the women's *bhakti* films – weeping copiously, praying to and worshipping the images of the goddess on screen, even occasionally being possessed by the screen goddess and moving into a trance. Indeed, these seemingly excessive viewer responses have made many modern film critics and feminists wary and anxious about the power these films seem to exert over a female audience.[14] However, filmmakers began to see such responses as a measure of the film's success.

Williams makes another interesting point about body genres and the seemingly perverse pleasures they apparently offer. She argues that audience identification is neither fixed nor passive in these films; rather, there is a constant oscillation between gendered spectatorial positions. Different genres are cultural forms of problem solving. Although she identifies an originary fantasy (seduction, castration) as the problem that each of these genres seeks to confront and resolve, I move away from the psychoanalytic framework to pursue the relation between gender and caste and the political-cultural question of citizenship in India.

Williams discusses the melodrama and the horror film as two distinct genres in American cinema. But the new feature in the 1990s goddess film is the strange and puzzling mixture of genres. Elements of horror begin to feature quite prominently along with the standard elements of the woman's melodrama. Why did the focus on *bhakti* and female hardships of earlier films need to be supplemented by the emotion of horror? What has invoked this horror? What is its relation to the new challenges for conceptualising citizenship? These are some of the questions I will now speculate upon.

The horror of an unravelling social order: new generic elements

The invocation and elaboration of the emotion of horror through *mise en scene*, music and overall narrative structure is distinctly evident in the films. They borrow many formal aspects from the horror genres of both Hollywood and Indian cinema. However, the question of horror cannot be adequately addressed by simply referring to these new elements. Their significance needs to be sought in the new plotlines and characters that people these films as well as in the social churning that was producing new modes of political subjectivity both on the cinema screen and outside it.

I argue that the 'horror' in these films mirrors the horror of witnessing an unravelling of a social order. In other words, the social structure and hierarchies that sustained an earlier order of power was seriously threatened in the last decade of the previous century. The earlier social order that was carefully pieced together by a secular nationalist ideology and a planned economy was well elaborated in the mythological and social films of the post-independence decades. These films had instituted a new nationalist patriarchal social order with a male representative figure at the centre of it and with the woman being assigned the place of the *sati*. However, when new political subjectivities such as feminist, dalit, minority Muslim or Christian and backward castes began to assert their political rights, sometimes in the name of equality and universal citizenship but often through critiquing such universalist claims and by precisely asserting their difference, horror was then perhaps a response to these challenges to earlier arrangements of power. The elements of horror in the goddess film ought to be seen as one way through which new narrative structures can be put in place.

Many goddess films which have been and continue to be dubbed from Tamil to Telugu or vice versa do not feed into the Telugu nationalist discourse in the ways in which the Telugu popular mythological genre does. Moreover, there are no respected literary or dramatic traditions from which the goddess film derives its material. Many early *sati* films were, no doubt, based on *sati* figures from the *Puranas* well-known across the country. But in the post-seventies devotional films, the stories and themes are drawn, rather, from orally circulating folk tales and popular contemporary stories about particular goddesses and their shrines or more often on original screenplays. *Ammoru*, for instance, credits its story to the entire production unit. The story was the result of a collective effort to come up with a generic village goddess tale which is a pastiche of earlier films, oral legends, and which combines the form of the woman's melodrama with the form of the popular horror novel and film. [15] An illustrative scene is one where an evil shaman, the principal villain of the film, seduces a young girl, drugs her and prepares to sacrifice her in a ritual to appease some evil spirits. In the eerie atmosphere of a graveyard, as he proceeds with his gory deeds, Bhavani chances upon him. Guessing his intentions, she alerts the local police and arrives with them to prevent the crime. Earlier in the film Bhavani is introduced as an orphan and a devotee of the local goddess. In this scene, however, we see her as a fearless crusader for justice, as a citizen who invokes the law to fight injustice. But as the film progresses and she is married and moves from the position of the orphan living in the temple to being the wife in a well-to-do household, she is rendered increasingly helpless and vulnerable and has to turn to the goddess for any kind of support. Her world gradually becomes horror-filled as the evil shaman returns from prison and, as her ill-luck will have it, he turns out to be her husband's cousin, now determined to seek revenge.

In an extremely interesting sequence, Bhavani's belief in what she sees is sorely put to the test. Her husband's family, in their efforts to drive her out of the house, hit upon a plan of psychological torture. They want to make their neighbours and Bhavani herself believe that she is going mad. She begins to

see things that nobody else can see (or so they have her believe). She cannot see what others are supposed to be able to see. In short, she loses a sense of certainty about people and things, belief in her own sensory perception – a condition of remaining sane in the world. Fear and horror are a result of this loss of belief. It is by creating these intense and almost unbearable situations of helplessness and torture for the woman that the film introduces dramatic moments of entry by the goddess, who effects last-minute rescues. It is as if horror is a necessary precondition for the appearance of the unrestrained goddess power. Each horrific scene is followed by a spectacular special-effects scene where the goddess displays her superior power.

Usurping the space of the subaltern

At the core of citizenship lies a conceptual tension between the citizens and subjects, as Balibar has demonstrated in his work.[16] The gap that separates citizens and subjects, the *subjectum* (the sovereign subject who freely submits to the Law) from the *subjectus* (who is subject to the authority of the Prince), is also one that can be mapped along gendered lines in popular cinema. While the male protagonist/star is able to emerge as an autonomous citizen on the Indian screen, the female protagonist/star can only occupy the position of the *subjectus* as *sati*, the good wife. It is a prior submission to Husband/God that authorises her as citizen or, more precisely, as citizen-devotee. It seems that her subjectivity is split into all-powerful goddess and female devotee, but cannot transcend both to appear as the autonomous sovereign figure. As I have tried to demonstrate, in the 1990s and early 2000s films too, despite the unapologetic portrayal of subaltern goddesses and their modes of worship, there remains a tension between the woman-devotee herself subaltern, and the subaltern goddess she worships.

If the recent success of the film *Arundhati* (Kodi Ramakrishna, 2008) is any indication, the goddess film is now eclipsed by a narrative centred on the woman, no doubt, but one who is no longer unambiguously subaltern. Rather, she helps usurp the representational space opened up by *Ammoru* (in however equivocal a manner) to reassert a hegemonic caste order. Made by the producer-director team of *Ammoru*, the film seems at first glance to be a reprise of the goddess film but might be more appropriately named a supernatural thriller, where elements of goddess film are referenced but the horror genre predominates. In publicity events, the film's director, Kodi Ramakrishna, repeatedly declared that the film was about *stree shakti*, the story of an empowered woman. But a close analysis of the film tells another story. In *Arundhati*, the cinematic elaboration of the subaltern ritual world that was evident in *Ammoru* is missing. There is no split here between goddess and devotee; in fact, the great goddess is not invoked at all. Instead, there is interplay between the woman's earlier birth as Jeamma, the fearless ruler of a provincial kingdom, and her modern contemporary self as an ordinary girl preparing to marry her fiancé. She is initially possessed by her ancestral self, Jeamma, against her will. Later on, of course, she willingly submits to this possession and confronts the villain of the film. Further, unlike earlier goddess films, there is no oppressive patriarchal family against which the woman struggles. The film presents an individualised and overtly sexualised struggle between the woman, who belongs to an upper-caste feudal family and a male antagonist, who is figured as a sexual predator. The film starkly brings forth the problematic nature of contemporary discourses of woman's agency and empowerment.[17] As caste and community identities of women are made invisible, the upper

caste Hindu woman emerges as the sole representative of the (supernaturally) empowered woman in *Arundhati* and threatens to usurp the space of the subaltern.

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