

## Abstract

This paper takes Anand Pandian’s notion of “agrarian civility” as a lens through which we can begin to understand the discourses of morality, merit, and exclusivity that color both popular Telugu film and Telugu IT workers’ understanding of their technologically enabled work. Popular Telugu film binds visual qualities of the landscape and depictions of heroic technological proficiency to protagonists’ internal dispositions and moralities. I examine the portrayal of the landscape and of technology in two Telugu films: *Dhee...kotti chudu*, and *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*, in order to more clearly discern the nature of this agrarian civility and—more importantly for thinking about Telugu IT workers—to make explicit its attribution of morality to “merit” and to technological proficiency.

*Keywords:* Information technology, morality, Telugu cinema, merit, agrarian civility

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**Looking Back at the Land: Discourses of Merit and Agrarian Morality in Telugu Popular Cinema and Information-Technology Labor**

In a chase scene in the popular Telugu film *Dhee...kotti chudu*, a nameless gangster—having just killed off his rival's family—is fleeing to Bangalore from Hyderabad, driving along roads surrounded by rocky, barren outcrops and shriveled patches of trees. The rival's boss confronts him unexpectedly on the deserted road, quickly and seemingly instantaneously surrounding him with his own men and vehicles, before killing him in retaliation. The film then quickly moves on to its main character, a rather comedic scam artist, and its main spaces, in the city of Hyderabad.<sup>1</sup> This particular stretch of barren landscape—scene to the violence that underlies a significant revenge plot woven into the film's story—is not returned to.

In another Telugu film, *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*, the climactic fight to save the film's heroine takes place in an abandoned temple, the rain pouring down and turning the bare earth in the temple compound to rivers of mud. There is verdant greenery out of focus in the background of the wide shots that comprise the fight scene—as if the memory of such greenery, of such life in the land, was quickly becoming hazy—but the violence of the fight is rooted in the bare brown earth, untilled and uncultivated, and the cut stone of the temple. Nothing grows here, in this soil that begets violence.

This cinematic move, in which certain landscapes are linked to actions of moral consequence—that is to say, in which morality is inscribed into the land itself—should not be seen as somehow unusual. Rather, the linkage of land and morality in the diegetic world of Telugu film speaks quite directly to the history of Telugu film production. It is a history tied to

the working of the land and its consequences—and even to the ultimate fracturing of Andhra Pradesh, and the creation of Telangana as an independent state. To claim that the land itself, in its physical nature, embodies a moral character is to make a claim on the kind of moralities its inhabitants might embody—and in turn, the moralities which a film’s viewers might hope to contain within themselves and in the work of their daily lives. In particular, I wish to look at how the landscape-derived morality constructed in Telugu films aligns with the “middle-class” mores of merit and exclusivity that characterize Telugu workers in the information-technology (IT) industry.

As Selvaraj Velayuthan (2008, p. 1) has noted, South India is the “country’s largest producer of films,” and the Tamil- and Telugu-language film industries alone account for 70% of Indian cinematic production. Yet both these film industries—and the underlying concerns that come to animate their diegetic and storytelling choices—have gone relatively understudied in comparison to the Hindi-language film industry, and to the broader cultural industry of *Bollywood* which has grown out of and alongside it (Rajadhyaksha, 2003). While the figure of the software engineer and the specter of information technology work have been relatively sidelined in popular Hindi film, both of these tropes have been widely deployed in South Indian popular cinema and broader public culture, as illustrated by recent projects such as S. Shankar’s 2008 science-fiction film *Enthiran*, where the Tamil superstar Rajnikanth plays a robotics engineer.

The public celebration of information technology is particularly resonant in Andhra Pradesh, with the regional Telugu Desam Party (TDP) under current party leader N.

Chandrababu Naidu refashioning its identity around the futuristic promise embedded within computers and information technology. Looking at the portrayal of technology within these popular Telugu films will thus offer us some insight into some of the underlying concerns and diegetic choices that animate contemporary South Indian films.

The relationship between the urbanized information-technology worker and the rural soil which is portrayed in these popular Telugu films is not nearly as distant as it would appear upon first glance. Xiang Biao notes in his ethnography of Telugu IT workers, *Global Body Shopping* (2007), that the production of Telugu “IT people” was centered in the rural capital and kin networks of the coastal Andhra delta, wherein the funds for a prospective IT worker’s training came from the dowry he could obtain from his wife’s relatives and network. Telugu IT workers historically hail from a region that is linked in the popular imagination with agricultural bounty: coastal Andhra Pradesh, which consists of the delta districts of Krishna, Guntur, East Godavari, and West Godavari, and the nondelta districts of Srikakulam, Vizianagaram, Visakhapatnam, Prakasam, and Nellore.

The majority of Telugu IT workers come from just four of these districts, all in the Krishna-Godavari delta: Guntur, Krishna, East Godavari, and West Godavari (Biao, 2007, p. 31). This tight interlocking of rural capital and the urban working world—in which the latter simply could not be possible without the presence of the former—suggests that a rural morality, built upon certain notions of the innate morals of the soil and those who worked it, could easily feed into the exclusivist notions of merit that IT workers use to characterize themselves and their work.

There is little research available on the routes by which ideas and morals traverse the urban-rural divide in the Indian IT industry. Given, however, the immense popularity of Telugu film in the delta region of coastal Andhra Pradesh, and the historically close linkages between this rural capital and film production, it is not much of a stretch to envision popular Telugu film as the medium by which a certain kind of moral universe based in the rural heartland could be propagated and spread to the towns and the cities that were the hubs of “production” for the “IT person” in Andhra Pradesh.

Illustrating the importance of film to the coastal Andhra region, S.V. Srinivas, in his study of a Korean film’s journey to Telugu cinema halls (2008b), notes that nearly 50% of a Telugu film’s revenue *for the entire state* of Andhra Pradesh comes from the coastal Andhra region. This is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that the former region of Telangana and the Rayalaseema region were each covered by a single film distribution territory, while the much smaller coastal region was split into six distribution territories. All four districts in the delta region—the same districts that Biao claims are primarily responsible for the production of Telugu IT workers—were their own film distribution territory.

To more clearly illustrate the linkages between a rurally derived morality based in the agricultural landscape, and the notions of exclusionary merit that color Telugu IT workers’ understandings of their own technologically demanding work, I look closely at scenes from two recent popular Telugu films Sreenu Vaitla’s comedy *Dhee...kotti chudu* [D, hit me and see], and Prabhu Deva’s family-oriented romance *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana* [If you said you would come, would I say no?]. While these two films belong to different genres, are set in different

locations, and depict their protagonists' virtues and vices in very different ways, both films speak to the notion of a moral character that is grounded within technological proficiency—a characteristic which marks the protagonists as distinctive and heroic—and the productivity of their labor. In *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana* the protagonists' capacity for goodness and heroism is quite directly and visually linked to the cultivation of the land. In *Dhee*, set within the urban landscape of Hyderabad, the land is elided as a visual referent, but the emphasis upon productivity and technological creativity remains at the forefront.

These cinematic emphases upon technological proficiency and productive labor speak to broader notions of “merit” in middle-class understandings of the self (Fernandes, 2000; van Wessel, 2004). The deployment of merit as a strategy to maintain stances of “exclusive inequality” within upper-class spaces such as elite universities (Deshpande, 2006, p. 2438) also demands a clearer analysis of the routes—such as popular media—through which notions of merit, exclusivity, and a concomitant sense of moral rectitude are propagated. Looking at these two films' portrayals of technology, the landscape, and heroism will thus provide us with a frame through which to consider the wider discourses of exclusion and merit that animate Telugu IT workers' characterization of their own transnational work.

#### **The civil countryside: Inscribing morality into the agricultural landscape**

To return, then, to the landscape: Anand Pandian (2008, p. 47) writes in *Crooked Stalks*, “Agrarian idioms of moral development rely on and reiterate a sense that there is something intrinsically virtuous about the practice of agriculture, the tools by means of which it is

exercised, and the people who wield these tools. They suggest that the *topos* of the cultivating landscape be taken as an essential setting for the ‘civilizing process’ in south India...” Pandian here is referring to a much older discourse—that of Tamil classical and folk poetry and idiom—but this notion of an agrarian idiom of morality, and the pivotal connection made here between a “civilized” self and a tamed and productive landscape is quite helpful in looking at the morality produced and propagated by popular Telugu films.

The predominant cultivators in the delta region of coastal Andhra Pradesh, from whence many a film producer and Telugu movie star arose, were members to the Kamma caste—a caste that Carol Upadhyaya (1988, p. 1433) terms the “capitalist farmers” or “rich peasants,” highlighting the quintessentially rural character of the capital they produced. The Kammas comprised most of the medium-to-large landowners in the coastal Andhra region, and as such benefited the most from technological interventions by the British, primarily dam construction on the Krishna and Godavari rivers. Harish Damodaran (2008), writing about the Kammas in *India’s New Capitalists*, notes that the reverence given to these technological projects is such that the British engineer behind their construction, Arthur Cotton, has a village—Cottonreddypalem—named after him in the West Godavari district, as well as a statue on Hyderabad’s Tank Bund, constructed by the Kamma chief minister (and popular film star) N.T. Rama Rao.

In 1847, with the aim of “converting the water of the Godavari into money,” (Damodaran, 2008, p. 93) Cotton constructed an anicut dam across the Godavari river, which was completed in 1852. A similar dam project was started that same year across the Krishna

river, and completed in 1855 (Damodaran, 2008). Prior to the construction of the dams, for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, agricultural productivity in the region had been subject to the whims of the weather, suffering from drought and severely decreased output, even resulting in occasional famine (Rao 1985, 1988). In the wake of the construction of the dams, Kamma farmers across the delta region turned to intensive paddy cultivation, obliterating a subsistence model of agriculture for its commercially oriented cousin.

Changes in land ownership policies—which resulted in the removal of middlemen landlords, thus ensuring the owner-cultivator had a more direct hand in the profitability of the land—also drove the shift towards commercial agriculture in the region. The technologically aided creation of the fertile delta had a profound impact on the kinds of lives Kamma farmers could expect to live, and such, on the kinds of futures they could imagine themselves as possessing.

Pandian (2008, p. 50), in writing about Kallar and Gounder farmers in Tamil Nadu, notes that they “imagine uplands, wetlands, and orchards in relation to a developmental trajectory that takes the last of these as much more civilized than the first. The qualities attributed to these distinctive agrarian spaces, however, are also easily attributed to the *laboring bodies and interior dispositions* [emphasis mine] of those who cultivate them.” Though his project concerns a different set of farmers—and a different linguistic culture—the notion that land might tell one about what kind of person one is, about the kind of person *one could be*, is immediately arresting in the Kamma context.



These rurally derived notions of hard work and constancy, based in notions of continual labor and patience with the rhythms of the cultivated soil, also feed easily into the logics of merit that several scholars have identified as a particular characteristic of the emergent middle and upper-middle classes in India, whose members tend to belong to upwardly mobile castes such as the Kammas. Looking at the importance of education and “credentials” to upper caste communities, Deshpande (2009) has noted that the collection of educational credentials served as one way to mobilize and individualize capital that had previously been bound up in the contained locality of agricultural work.

Credentials from institutes such as IIT or AIIMS, Deshpande writes, being internationally recognizable and transferrable, served as a means through which once landlocked capital could be rendered both individualized and mobile. The anthropologist Ajantha Subramanian (2015), in a recent piece on invocations of merit in the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), notes that meritocratic claims are closely embedded within articulations of caste: either through a disavowal of caste or through explicit and exclusive claims of belonging.

The diegetic expression of moral standing and meritorious character I examine in these popular Telugu films—the depiction of a relationship between goodness and the cultivated land, the attribution of heroism to a certain technological proficiency—are, in similar ways, tightly bound up with the history of Telugu filmmaking and capital mobilization of the landowning Kamma caste of coastal Andhra Pradesh. The next section provides a brief overview of how Telugu film production was very much a story of caste, capital, and the mobility of men and money.

**“Making pictures in Madras”: the rural roots of Telugu film production**

The cinematic unison of morality and landscape seen in Telugu films is arguably also a product of the history of Telugu film production itself. Kamma involvement in Telugu films was prominent from the earliest days—the first Telugu film studio of sorts, Sarathi Films, began production in 1936, funded by a local king from Challapalli, in the Krishna district of the Andhra delta (Damodaran, 2008, p. 99-102). Damodaran also wryly notes that “it is said of the prosperous Kamma farmer that after every paddy harvest he goes to Chennai with the proceeds and makes a ‘picture.’”

Several present-day studios, production units and distributors have roots in the rural capital of the coastal Andhra region, including Prasad Film Lab—the nation’s largest film-processing unit—and Andhra Pradesh’s largest distributor of films, Suresh Productions. S.V Srinivas, terming the Telugu film industry a “peasant industry” (2010, p. 169), makes a compelling argument for the centrality of film production as a means of capital mobility for those middle-to-large farmers whose capital had—until their movement into the film industry—been invested in work upon their land and in the lifeworld of their rural homelands.

Srinivas (2010, p. 170) also suggests that in order to understand cinema’s role in the world of the emerging elite castes like the Kammas, it is necessary to track the “*mobility* of men and money from agriculture...into new geographical areas and spheres of investment.” As I have noted previously, the “landed” capital of the landowning upper castes was made mobile in several ways: through the aggregation of educational credentials, through the establishment of

small industries and the urbanization of delta towns like Guntur and Kakinada (Srinivasulu, 2002), and through, as Srinivas notes, the film industry. The emergence of Madras as a center of Telugu film production in the 1930's coincided with the movement of both men and money from the rural heartlands in coastal Andhra Pradesh to Madras (Srinivas, 2010).

Initially, these Telugu film entrepreneurs were *zamindars* [landowners] of other castes, but Kammas soon followed, including L.V Prasad (the founder of the previously mentioned Prasad Film Lab), N.T Rama Rao (NTR) and Akkineni Nageswara Rao (ANR), both of whom would go on to become major film stars and regional powers. NTR would go on to become chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, whereas ANR was primarily responsible for the relocation of the Telugu film industry to Hyderabad in the 1990s (alongside fellow Kamma film production mogul D. Ramanaidu)—a move kick-started when he established his production facilities, Annapurna Studios, in the city. It was this initial generation of Telugu film creators, workers, and producers, Srinivas (2010, p. 176) notes, who had the closest and most direct ties to the agricultural lands and capital that funded their forays to the metropole.

By the 1950s, the cultivator kin networks and capital inflows that were based in the agricultural lands of coastal Andhra had become well-established in the Telugu film production scene in Madras. D. Ramanaidu—who went on to establish the state's largest film distribution and production facility, Suresh Productions—arrived in 1954, aiming to enter the real estate business. Kammas worked in production, acting, exhibition, and distribution (Srinivas, 2010).

It is worth noting here as well the peculiar mobility of capital that the Telugu film industry required then and now: Films were financed primarily by the inflows of new speculative

capital from fresh investors, rather than self-sustaining profits from the exhibition of the films themselves (Shaw, 2011). The continual stream of investments that drove the Telugu film industry no doubt solidified the perceived and actual connections between the agricultural work that went on in the rural hinterlands of coastal Andhra Pradesh and the work of film production and filmmaking that went out in geographically distant, metropolitan Madras.

**The verdant land, the moral farmer: *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana***

I take note of this history here in order to more carefully consider the historical (and, if we are to follow Pandian, the *moral*) weight of certain images—particularly those of the lush greenery of the paddy fields surrounding the rural village. In *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*, the heroine of the film, Siri (whose name means *wealth* in Telugu), is introduced to the viewing audience in a musical number that centers upon the village in which she lives. Over a cheerfully upbeat song, *Chandrulo*, that compares the heroine to a rabbit descended from the moon, the scene pans over verdant green fields, tall with bountiful crops. Siri's own home is set upon a mound amongst wide paddy fields, and stock images of lush greenery dominates the landscape portrayed in the song.

What is crucial to point out here is that *Chandrulo* cements Siri's status as an ideal Telugu woman—the presence of her in the lush fields gives her moral grounding, literally and figuratively. Unlike the scenes of transient and intense violence set in barren landscapes that opened this paper, here the lush greenery contributes to developing the viewer's sense of Siri as a *moral being*—the land is presented as particularly evocative of her moral solidity as a

character. To sing amongst the green fields—to inhabit them and know them with ease, as the cultivator does—is to display, openly and visually, one’s inner nature as a morally capable person.

This particular song from *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana* is compelling for another reason—it links, visually and sequentially, two landscapes that have historically been opposed to each other within the realms of Telugu film,<sup>2</sup> that of the skyscraper-laden city and the fields of the village. The hero, Santosh, who is introduced alongside Siri in this song, is exceedingly comfortable in the urban landscape in the same way Siri wanders freely around the village—he frequents the mall and coffeehouses, hangs out with his friends amongst the steel-and-glass towers of the city center, rides in an open-topped convertible and sings into a mobile phone, displaying his casual, joyful ease with personal technology. The song cuts back and forth between Siri in the fields and Santosh in the city, setting them upon the same moral plane within its diegetic realm.

The linkage made in this song—between the moral capability and grounding of the rural farmland, and the technologically savvy urban hero of the city—is thus not incompatible with the notions of a morality arising from particular kinds of land, and of the work done upon that land. Though Pandian does not talk about the urban landscape in his work, it is imperative to point out that, in the case of the Krishna-Godavari delta—and its Kamma landowners—the development of wetland cultivation was inextricably linked to significant technological developments, chiefly the construction of the dams on the Krishna and Godavari rivers and the resulting modifications to the rivers’ flows. This *affective* and morally laden notion of what technology could do for one

is also illustrated in a curious fact that Damodaran points out in *India's New Capitalists* (2008): on Hyderabad's Tank Bund, alongside statues of Potti Sriramulu—the activist who died in the agitation for a Telugu state (Mitchell, 2009)—and Nannaya, the first Telugu poet, there stands a statue of Sir Arthur Cotton, the dam builder.

The greenery of the fields in Siri's village, far from being a pristine place of untouched natural beauty, should instead be seen as a deliberate result *produced from* intensive labor and technological intervention—a theme that comes to form the backdrop to the latter half of the film. The green field is as much a manmade landscape as the glass and steel towers which Santosh inhabits in the city. The moral character of the cultivated field, in other words, is also the moral character of the technological intervention that tamed the river, and allowed such cultivable land to become possible in the first place. A technologically savvy hero, urban as he might be, would not (and perhaps could not) be incompatible within the agrarian morality of the Krishna-Godavari delta, as shot through with technological aid as it was.

In *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*, the pivotal dramatic tension of the film emerges from Santosh and Siri's meeting and falling in love with each other. Until this point, Santosh has been portrayed as a friendly, propriety-ignoring, Skype-and-laptop wielding comedian—cheerfully breaking the traditional rules of the household where he's staying and delighting everyone in his wake. Siri's older brother—a farmer who raised his sister by himself after his wealthy father abandoned them and their mother died—refuses to allow a rich boy like Santosh to wed his sister. Santosh is determined, however—and instead of killing him, Siri's brother challenges him

to a contest: to live as the farmer does and tend to his own plot of land, with him winning Siri's hand if his harvest turns out to be greater than the brother's own.

The centrality of land—of *productively working* the land—to the determination of one's moral value is perhaps nowhere more evident than in this particular contestation. Santosh's urbanite father even says to Siri at one point that her love has taught his son the value of working the soil. Yet, even here, the technology and modernity of Santosh's old urban life finds a way to exist comfortably in the rural landscape. This is best shown in the song montage that highlights Santosh's breakthrough in maintaining his farm. For the first few days of his trial, Santosh fares about as well as one would expect—he cannot get the bullocks to plough his field, he cannot milk the buffaloes in his shed, cannot endure the food, and is thoughtfully tormented by the older brother's right hand man. Siri visits him secretly in the night, and gives him a kiss to encourage him. Emboldened, he sets about his task anew.

In the montage that follows, set to a decidedly punchy techno beat, Santosh utilizes his own technological creativity in order to complete the agrarian tasks required of him. Instead of falling back on “traditional” methods of agriculture, he ties a Walkman to his buffalo's head, headphones over ears, in order to placate her as he milks her, puts an iron plate down his pants in order to fend off a particularly headbutt-friendly goat, and dresses up a female buffalo in flowers, pink lipstick, paper sunglasses, and anklets in order to charm his headstrong ploughing team of bullocks into obeying him. All these solutions are presented as decidedly unconventional, if the reactions of the surprised passerby are anything to go on. But what they are not presented as in the film is *incompatible*—this deployment of technology and creativity is also a part of the rural

world that Santosh sees and acts in. These unorthodox actions, in service of working the land, are presented as a positive development of Santosh's character. No longer is he desperate and complaining about the work involved in maintaining the land—he has instead come to it, and accepted the goodness of such work, in his own way.

It is telling that the villains of *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*—Santosh's rich uncle who wants him to marry his own daughter, a rival landlord and his own amorous son, and their jointly hired goon—are never portrayed as actively engaging in the work of maintaining the land and harvesting the field. Indeed, the hired goon—portrayed comedically here, though very much a villain in the moral register of the film—is primarily engaged on-screen in the act of destroying the fields, in order to set Santosh back in his quest. The landlord's son and the goon conspire to burn down Santosh's fields, which they fail to do—though they do set the barn on fire. The fact that the hired goon's villainous character is primarily made apparent through his destructive acts upon the land—rather than anything he says to others, though his wild hair and dress seem to indicate a lack of *self-cultivation*—is arresting. In the moral universe of the film, one's goodness is primarily determined by the relationship that one has—or does not have—with the land.

While the comedic goon has his sympathetic moments during the film's run, he is never portrayed in as heroic or human a light as the laboring Santosh or the hardworking older brother. Pandian (2008, p. 53) writes, speaking of the semisettled Kallar people of southern Tamil Nadu, "To inhabit the *katu* [the uncultivated forest or wasteland], it appeared, was to struggle against boars and elephants but also against the judgments of those living less precariously in a more settled place." This judgment—this relationship between one's possible civility and the terrain



which one lives in—is echoed powerfully in the figure of the hired goon, who has no discernible relationship with the land, who flees when the tide turns against his employers, and who is portrayed as decidedly incompetent against the (literally and figuratively) grounded heroes.

There is no moment of redemption for him, given all the abuse he has doled out to the land, and his refusal to stake a nondestructive claim to it.

#### **Techno-boys take the town: *Dhee...kotti chudu***

Turning back to the morality of the hero—and its latent linkage between technologically aided productivity and one's innate goodness—one finds that this morality persists in arenas where the landscape itself is not conducive to developing a sound moral character. *Dhee...kotti chudu*, the film whose violence opened this paper, is set almost entirely within Hyderabad—which, as an affective landscape, is marked by a decided ambivalence. The film's narration opens upon with quick, jarring shots of the Old City of Hyderabad, visually marked by stock images of the Charminar's minarets and the distinctive architecture of domed Nizam-era buildings. It is, visually and in actuality, miles apart from the lush greenness and rural environment that characterizes most of *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*. Hyderabad is crowded, home to feuds, and impassable to those who do not already know it well.

Yet the hero of *Dhee...kotti chudu*, a con-man of sorts named Babloo, is a man who openly declares to his friend (and the audience, by extension) that he relies on his brains more than his physical brawn—and what chases and skirmishes he is involved are played more for comedy, with him alternating between lying, running away, and using his friends' bodies as

shield and weapon all at once. It is telling that the opening con Babloo runs involves selling police-owned property in a fake land deal—even in this decidedly urban film, the invocation of land as holding a certain kind of power over people’s means of living finds its place.

Babloo’s technological capability comes to the forefront when his father, tired of constantly bailing him out of jail, sends him off to work for a local ganglord, Shankar Goud. Irrepressible to a fault—and invoking *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*’s Santosh in his cheery disregard for workplace rules—Babloo wins the favor of the ganglord by corporatizing his accounting practices and explicitly making himself the “technology man” of the group. Over the course of a few days, Babloo convinces Shankar Goud to buy counting machines to efficiently deal with the sacks of cash he deals in—making the calculation that one counting machine could do 10 hours of work in a single hour—and invest in some computers (because, as he says in English to Goud, “while men can make mistakes, the computer cannot”) and the requisite air conditioning needed to keep them functioning.

Upon being asked why air conditioning is needed by one of Goud’s henchmen, he mulls over an explanation, and then says that air conditioning to computers is like food for humans. Babloo is later shown looking at pictures of scantily clad actresses and White women on the computer—slacking off at work, in other words, instead of being the very efficient and productive worker he sells himself to Goud as (while also comedically setting his coworker’s nerves on edge). Goud’s sister then manages to blackmail Babloo into taking her to a movie by shooting a video of him slacking off on her cellphone, stating that he is not the only one who knows how to use technology. The protagonists’ respective capabilities with technology—rather

than their physical prowess or internal values—set them apart from the rest of Goud’s gang, who are mostly portrayed as a bunch of machete-wielding muscleheads, if relatively good-hearted.

In *Dhee*, a distinctly different register of heroism is at work, one that sets Babloo apart from Santosh in *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*. While Santosh’s physical toil on the land defined and marked his heroism alongside his technological creativity, here it is Babloo’s mere invocation of a proficiency with technological creativity—rather than his actual labor with the machine—that sets him apart from the (essentially good, but not explicitly heroic) characters of Shankar Goud’s gang. Unlike *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*, which is primarily set outdoors, in the spaces of the fields and of the village, *Dhee...kotti chudu* primarily takes place indoors—either in various buildings, or in different contained spaces—the cinema hall, the domestic space of the home (which doubles as workplace), the restaurant.

The cityscape of Hyderabad itself—its streets, parks, and public spaces—is completely elided within the film’s narrative; only serving as an opening marker of fearsome strangeness. Unlike *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*, where the verdant greenness of the land is returned to time and again—its presence the marker of moral cultivation—in *Dhee*, the urbanized landscape of Hyderabad is not given much screen time or affective consideration by any of the central characters. Unlike the green fields of the coastal Andhra village, which the characters of *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana* live for and die by, the landscape of the city does not inspire similar claims of moral fashioning, of self-actualization. Yet *Dhee*’s invocation of *productivity* and technological creativity being the keys to a hero’s self-making are in the end extremely similar to the agrarian morality *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana* locates in the cultivated fields.

Tellingly, the villains of *Dhee*—a gang with a blood feud to settle with Shankar Goud—are never once shown with “productive” technology like the computer or the counting machine, but rather with the weapons of destruction—shotguns, machetes, physical brawn. Their status as villains is primarily determined by their excessive physical violence towards each other and outsiders, but also by their inability to work with—or otherwise be seen with—technology that would allow for profit or production. The moral importance of cultivation—of *producing something* from one’s own land—is in *Dhee* transferred to the ability to work well with technology—to make productive use of what one has in the ambivalent urban landscape, given that the option of working the soil is no longer present.

#### **Technologically attainable goodness: The moral possibilities of IT work**

This brings us, then, to IT workers in South India, and the way in which they view themselves and the kind of work that they do. In discourse outside of the film world, technology is seen as an embodiment of aspiration and desire (Pal, Lakshmanan, and Toyama, 2007; Pal, 2010).

Looking at the sites and practices of IT workers, Smitha Radhakrishnan (2011, p. 88) notes:

Most of the IT workers I spoke to in Silicon Valley and in Bangalore did not speak of their work in IT as just another job, but an actualizing job, one that recognized and rewarded their merits as professionals while encouraging them to grow as individuals...Such ideas of empowerment, individual accountability, and personal striving do emerge from globally circulating managerial discourses...But perhaps more importantly, they emerge from the logic of merit—a logic that is folded powerfully into

knowledge economy discourses and the rhetoric of a “new India” that has left behind the quasi-bureaucratic socialist government jobs of the past.

Radhakrishnan does not explicitly identify her informants by region, caste or ethnicity, but given the high percentages of upper and intermediate caste South Indian people working in the IT industry in Bangalore and abroad, it wouldn't be too far a stretch to see this discourse of “an actualizing job” as a quite natural extension of the Telugu cinematic discourse of certain kinds of proficiency and work producing moral people. Carol Upadhyā's (2007) research into Bangalore-based IT workers showed a high percentage of IT workers came from “Tier II” and “Tier III” cities—Guntur is specifically mentioned by name, and these kinds of cities are precisely those locations where Kammas are based in the Andhra delta.

The claim made in *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana* of a moral man being a man who can successfully work the soil echoes the claim made here by IT workers that the right job can encourage one to grow and become actualized as a person in the world. It also echoes the concept of “merit” prevalent in discussions about and within the emergent Indian upper-middle class, a concept Radhakrishnan herself highlights as central to IT workers' self-understanding. Deshpande (2013, p. 32-33), in his examination of how modern-day upper-caste communities render themselves “casteless” subjects in public discourse, notes that “modern” qualifications, such as job titles or educational credentials, are used to mask the upper caste connections and capital that undergird prestigious universities, or high-paid workforces such as the IT sector's. The cinematic attachment of moral value to particular kinds of labor—in particular, to kinds of technologically intensive and creative labor—may serve as a means by which the historically

contingent processes of caste mobilization and capital accumulation are transformed instead into affective questions of individualized internal *goodness*, of a person's moral standing and rectitude.

The discourse that surrounds the work of IT is shot through with similar discussions of needing to improve one's *self* and one's labor constantly for the workplace, of needing to be flexible. Radhakrishnan (2007, p. 157) notes, "Job seeking is not just an insecurity of the market or a nuisance, but rather a necessary step toward self-improvement. The necessity to retrain or change professions is not an occupational hazard, but rather a challenge that ensures self-development and a competitive edge in the market." This idea of labor as being integral to the development of the self is a claim that rings true with the idea of innately moral labor that inhabits the discourse of Pandian's Kallar and Gounder farmers in rural Tamil Nadu.

Radhakrishnan locates another constitutive part of her IT worker informants' identities in the concept of *background*. Background, Radhakrishnan (2011) notes, is a strangely slippery term—it is used by IT workers to refer to all sorts of demarcative characteristics: caste, class, educational history, and family ties, amongst others. The discourse of "background" serves, in other words, as a silent way to read what people once were, and what people could possibly be. What Radhakrishnan does not dwell on, however, is how "background" constitutes one's moral orientation. In other words, could it not be that this complex mix of family ties, of certain histories ignored and remembered, fed into the notions of "valuable work" and "merit" that so thoroughly seep into the discourse of IT workers? Is the way IT workers speak of their jobs not indicative of a *moral* stance in regards to their fellow "knowledge economy" workers as well?

One of Radhakrishnan's (2011, p. 45) informants, Ashok, mourns the perceived disintegration of "Indian culture" by locating it in the practices of BPO (business process outsourcing, i.e. call-center) workers: "People here have become more materialistic and so permissive, but I will limit that to the call center industry...Call center companies have actually started neglecting things...If you move away from your culture, you lose...People in IT are less susceptible to this. I think there is a different culture here." Radhakrishnan notes that Ashok speaks of his own work "in terms of a commitment to a non-materialist ethos."

One is reminded in this moment of Santosh abandoning the city and its luxuries, all for the chance to sweat in his physical labor, to eat the salt of his own cultivated soil—and by these virtues win the woman he loves. The discussion of "culture," and of what constitutes a good "background," is at its heart a moral calculation, one based on the exceptionality of one's labor, and the fruit of one's patience. Pandian (2008, p. 48) notes that the rural "agrarian civility" of Tamil Nadu is "an imagination of improvement arrayed alongside a developmental trajectory, reaching from the most savage inhabitant of savage tracts toward the civil cultivator of the most civilized terrain."

This trajectory—linking the savage and the cultivator within a single moral spectrum—is visible in the IT world as well, in the discourse of the "neglectful" BPO worker vis-à-vis the "cultured" IT worker. There is no sense that one could become the other, but the implications of danger inherent in the body and lifestyle of the BPO worker find parallels in the ways Pandian's (2008, p. 61) cultivator informants talk about their Kallar neighbors, and their "proximity to incivility," as he terms it.

**Outside looking in: Agrarian morality and the fight for Telangana**

This moral calculus is, of course, a two-headed creature. As Pandian (2008, p. 57) notes, agrarian civility is “trailed by critical rejections, contrary imaginations, and even ironic reversals of their import and outcome.” On the one hand, this valorization of the morality of certain kinds of labor on certain types of land allowed for a remarkably smooth transition to technologically based “knowledge economy” work for Kammas, which they have taken to in ever-increasing numbers. As Harish Damodaran (2008, p. 109-114) points out, the rural bounty that came from the Andhra delta allowed the Kammas to take up a whole range of work—everything from filmmaking and regional media conglomerates to pharmaceutical companies and construction work. But it is this very same attachment of morality to one’s work—and more precisely, to the work that one’s homeland soil could allow one to do—that contributed in no small way to the revitalization of the Telangana independence movement, and the successful separation of Telangana from Andhra Pradesh.

In a 2010 interview with the English-language magazine *Tehelka* (Chakrabarti, 2010, para. 16), Kumarasamy, a student activist deeply involved in the movement for a Telangana state, noted, “The only time a character in a Telugu movie speaks in a Telangana accent is when he is meant to be ridiculed.” Krishank, another activist, said, “We are migrating from these areas to...Mumbai and Dubai as drivers and electricians. The manual labor is from Telangana, the intellectual brains always from Andhra.” *Tehelka* noted that a major sticking point in the Telangana agitation is the issue of water rights, as the Godavari and Krishna rivers both flow



through the region, yet received little of their water. Indeed, as a later report in *The Caravan* (Donthi, 2014, para. 18) noted, one of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi's rallying cries during the movement was "*neellu, nidhulu, niyamakalu*" (water, jobs, appointments)—a slogan that spoke quite directly to the importance of fertile land and its relation to a people's imagined productivity.

The association made here between one's land and one's worth—both in the Telangana Rashtra Samithi's sloganeering and in Krishank's anger over Telanganites' relegation to manual labor and irrelevance—flares up here in a particularly powerful way, and again challenges the notion that discourses of merit or exclusivity are purely a creation of the IT work-world, or its concomitant multinational corporate culture. In Andhra Pradesh, and in Telugu film, the depiction of morality as attached to a particular kind of land—a particular *region*, more tellingly—stakes a powerful claim for the right to belong to the category of *people who matter*.

We could, once again, return to the character of the hired goon in *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*, whose only action is to destroy and be mocked, or to the arid landscapes of the entire genre of "factional" films—which are laden with despair and violence,<sup>3</sup> but the point I wish to make in bringing this up is that this agrarian morality, deeply embedded within the history of Telugu film production and, is a site for deep contestation, even within the boundaries of the state as it stands today.

As S.V. Srinivas noted in *The Caravan* (2013, para. 15), Telugu film production was at a crossroads with the creation of the new Telangana state—the region had been responsible for nearly half of box office collections, and anti-Telangana protests in the coastal Andhra and

Rayalaseema regions in 2013 delayed the release of big-budget productions. More compelling to Srinivas, however, was the staunch fixation on a particular narrative strategy by popular Telugu films: instead of trying anything radically new in terms of storylines, he observed, the films retreated back to the village, dragging their globalized heroes out of their cities to “avenge the glorious dead in the remotest of villages.” The pull of the rural heartland as the site of contestation, as the site where one is ultimately *made* as a moral being, still remains, even as the political structures that facilitated its cinematic creations are in massive upheaval.

#### **Conclusions: Morality and meritorious technology**

I end, then, with the Telugu film as site of a particular moral claim. In *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*, on the eve of the final harvest which will determine his fate, Santosh confesses to his love Siri that even if he loses the contest with her brother he wishes to stay on in the village, and perhaps continue working his bit of land—he has come to love this village, with all its deficiencies and quirks, its cattle, his bit of paddy land. This move, to show agricultural work and the life of the village as profoundly affective and transformative, is not some call to a past romanticism, but instead an acknowledgement of a deeply felt connection between the quintessential city boy and the land that has come to define his moral being.

If we are to take seriously the relationships and influences that define the IT worker in South India today, it is not enough to confine ourselves to studies of corporate culture, or the distinctive space of the multinational office. What are the moral and affective claims lodged by kin networks, by cinematic associations between the rural land and the globalized office? Studies

of middle-class moralities have primarily focused on the middle-class' imagination of themselves as consumer-citizens (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Srivastava, 2009), but as I have illustrated in this paper, specific moralities of *production* may also track between the globalized office and the rural land.

This locality and particularity is especially important to remember when one considers the centrality of technological proficiency and skill to Telugu IT workers' understandings of their own value as good workers, and moral beings. Such valorizations of technological skill cannot only be understood as some kind of "Western" cultural import, and they are not necessarily an indicator of a more globalized ethos or sense of belonging (see Chari, 2004 on similar discourses of morality and toil amongst small-town knitwear factory owners in Tamil Nadu). The attribution of moral rectitude to internalized productivity and technological proficiency in Telugu popular cinema may be part of a broader discursive strategy to render the historical strategies and dominant positions of upper caste communities in venues such as lucrative employment and prestigious education as intangible, natural and seemingly inevitable. (One can think here of *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana*'s hapless goon: endlessly creative in his attempts at destroying the field, endlessly foiled by the more "productive" hero, with his technological prowess; or the heroine's older brother in *Dhee*, violent and good-hearted, but still in need of the unorthodox technological proficiency of the protagonist in order to truly succeed.)

As Deshpande's work on the creation of "castelessness" illustrates, the notion of internalized "merit"—a notion not dissimilar to the morality attributed to the innate value of hard work and technological skill in both of these popular films—can and does naturalize the

exclusionary strategies at work today in arenas like elite education and the IT industry. Claims for the morality of work—for the essential importance of labor upon one's being—are made in all kinds of venues—including popular media—with their own distinctive histories. To understand the particulars of these histories, and the exclusions latent within them, is to understand the complexity that drives both the making of the moral self and the enforcement of its boundaries, within the living of one's everyday life.

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**Comment [A1]:** So this is published in the proceedings?

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The ambiguity surrounding the space of Hyderabad is notable (Srinivas, 2008a)—but Hyderabad is not characterized by a plenitude of violence in the way that the dry, uncultivable landscape is depicted as being in several Telugu films. Chief amongst these are the films of Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao, Jr., in particular *Singam* and *Aadi*; director Ram Gopal Varma's recent political thriller *Rakta Charitra*, set in the arid Rayalaseema region; and the films of Balakrishna, especially *Samarasimha Reddy*.

<sup>2</sup>Several examples of the tension between the city and the village (often depicted via the complications of the protagonists' love story, or the relationship between siblings) be had from older Telugu films, such as *Manchi manasalu* (1962), *Budhimanthudu* (1969), *Ummadi kutumbam* (1967), *Patnam vachina pativratalu* (1982), *Sitaramayyagari manavaralu* (1991) and *Chinnabbai* (1997).

<sup>3</sup>Chief amongst these is the 1990's film *Anthapuram*, starring Soundarya. The relationship between violent Telugu "factional films" and the arid, dying landscapes of Rayalaseema (and especially the YSR Kadapa district) is here not examined, but seems especially relevant as a counterpoint to the associations between fertile land and morality that I make in this paper.

Looking back at the land: Discourses of agrarian morality in Telugu popular cinema and information-technology labor.

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