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# Feeling anger, compassion and community in popular Telugu cinema

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*In 2008, actor Chiranjeevi founded the political party Praja Rajyam (People's Rule) and carried the emotional style of the compassionate angry man from the silver screen onto the electoral platform of the South Indian state Andhra Pradesh. Although Chiranjeevi had secured his place as the most successful star of popular Telugu cinema through the genre of the mass film in the 1980s, the 'Megastar' failed to mobilise a majority of his fans to become his voters. The article addresses the tensions between the politics of representation on the screen and on the campaign trail by focusing on the image of Chiranjeevi as a leader figure and the feeling community that complemented his emotional style. It suggests that when the star suddenly transformed his image from an angry rebel to that of a compassionate patron, his emotional style stopped resonating with the feeling community his own films had created.*

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**Keywords:** Cinema, Telugu, Andhra Pradesh, virtuous anger, angry young man

Film star Chiranjeevi aspired to become the chief minister (CM) of the South Indian state Andhra Pradesh during the elections in 2009. From 1980s onwards, popular Telugu cinema cast him in the role of an altruistic angry young man, who, in his fight for social justice, becomes an idealised leader. Chiranjeevi's image brought together communities that were meant to feel no less than a nation both on and beyond the screen. This article explores the relationship between Chiranjeevi's emotional style in roles of leadership and the feeling communities that formed through its consumption.

In this article, I use the analytical concept 'emotional style' to theorise how emotional performances of leadership and community are mutually dependent. The article discusses the development of Chiranjeevi's emotional style by analysing the concepts, expressions and narratives that defined his image as a 'hero' at different stages of his career and explains how the sociocultural construction of his leadership image formed corresponding feeling communities that rallied around Chiranjeevi. The notion of style has recently gained prominence in studies that link emotions in popular Indian cinema to popular politics. In his study on the

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‘melodramatic public’, film scholar Ravi Vasudevan analyses melodramatic styles of narration and acting to discuss the impact of cinema on the formation of shared public sentiments.<sup>1</sup> Cultural theorist and film scholar S.V. Srinivas argues in his book on the Telugu actor-politician N.T. Rama Rao (NTR) that cinema in Andhra Pradesh induced a style of ‘politics as performance’ that continues to have resonance today. After entering electoral politics in the early 1980s, NTR used a number of techniques from his singular cinematic style in his political campaigns, including role-playing, directing the attention of his spectators, imagining the population of Andhra Pradesh as the addressee of the political performance and the use of excessive emotions and exaggeration.<sup>2</sup> Although Vasudevan and Srinivas sometimes link emotions, passions or affects to definitive cinematic and political styles, they do not undertake a systematic analysis of these relations. In this article, I seek to show that a systematic historical analysis of emotions can refine our understanding of how popular Indian cinema permeated the political public and how both filmmakers and viewers used popular films to navigate feelings of anger, compassion, loyalty, affection and belonging.

This article deals with a set of imagined communities that have been evoked by popular Telugu films: the Indian national community, the people of Andhra Pradesh (*praja; āndhrulu*), the local community of a typical Telugu village or neighbourhood and the fans of Chiranjeevi and his political supporters (*abhimānulu*). As I will show below, popular Telugu films depicted these communities as one by merging them all into the concept of the ‘mass’. In Telugu ‘cine-politics of representation’,<sup>3</sup> all communities framed through the concept of ‘mass’ share three related features: First, they are shown to consist of and/or represent the common people; second, they are posed as a legitimate embodiment or representative of the people’s nation against a false nation, which is represented by a corrupt establishment and the inefficient and unjust bureaucratic institutions of the nation-state; third, they are explicitly conceptualised as being bound by emotions, which have to be enabled, evoked, synchronised or managed by a leader (*nāyakudu*). Since the emotions of the leader and the emotions of ‘his’ community are inseparable from one another, the feelings of the leader towards the community and its enemies are just as important for the cohesion of the community as the feelings of the people.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars of Indian popular culture have already described cinema as an important vehicle for building feelings of nationhood and constructing sub-national identities through the evocation of shared patriotic feelings.<sup>5</sup> The unifying objects of shared

<sup>1</sup> Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*.

<sup>2</sup> Srinivas, *Politics as Performance*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Prasad, *Cine-politics*; *idem*, ‘Cine-politics’.

<sup>4</sup> For another argument about the importance of studying the emotions of the ‘masses’, ‘the people’ or ‘movements’ in connection with emotions that constitute ‘power’ and ‘leadership’ see Ost, ‘Politics as the Mobilization of Anger’.

<sup>5</sup> Dwyer and Pinney, *Pleasure and the Nation*; Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination*; Baskaran, *The Message Bearers*; Velayutham, *Tamil Cinema*.

affection comprise the nation itself, patriotic symbols and a common language. I argue that since the late 1980s, the most effective ‘object’ of affection and loyalty in Telugu cinema’s treatment of the complexities of national belonging has been the figure of the leader. As film scholar Madhava Prasad observes, post-independence South Indian cinema has been a ‘site of a strong political investment, where audiences responded with enthusiasm to an offer of leadership emanating from the screen and, through the fan associations that emerged later, established a concrete set of everyday practices that re-affirmed the position of the star as leader’.<sup>6</sup> By focusing on the emotions that bind the leader and the community, I also seek to investigate the emotional responses to the forms of leadership and belonging rehearsed, taught and enabled by Telugu mass films.

The analysis follows the historical development of Chiranjeevi’s emotional style in roles of leadership in three parts. The first part explains how the ‘mass film’ popularised anger as a leadership quality. The example of the film *Tagore* (V.V. Vinayak, 2003) shows how Chiranjeevi came to be viewed as a ‘leader of the masses’ in his role as virtuously angry man. The second part explains how the emotional style of patriotic anger became fused with compassion in order to promote a nation of compassionate and affectionate people, such as in *Stalin* (A.R. Murugadoss, 2006). The third part moves the analysis beyond the screen and looks at Chiranjeevi’s image as a politician. I claim that Chiranjeevi’s shift of emotional style from angry rebel to compassionate patron produced a rift between the leader and his fans as a politicised feeling community. Was it this emotional discord that transformed Chiranjeevi’s fans into defiant voters, rendering the star’s political career a failure?

### **The Angry Young Man Unites the ‘Masses’**

The Telugu film *Khaidi* (Prisoner, A. Kodandarami Reddy, 1983) cast Chiranjeevi in the role of a young lower class, lower caste man who seeks revenge against the *zamindar* of his village and a powerful system of injustice and corruption. *Khaidi* has retrospectively gained iconic status as the film that made Chiranjeevi into a ‘Megastar’—as he is also called by his fans and in the media—and for becoming a trend setter for the genre of the ‘mass film’. The cinematic ‘formula’ of the mass film continued to dominate the Telugu film industry until the mid-1990s and still collects high revenues at the box office today. The films are characterised by stories of anger and revenge, action-centred entertainment and the leading male star in the role of a heroic social underdog. The mass film fashioned the concept of ‘mass’ into a label for a certain style of popular youth culture: There are ways of dancing mass, dressing mass and talking mass in opposition to the habitus of the mannered class. At the same time, mass films address the masses as their implied audience

<sup>6</sup> Prasad, ‘Cine-politics’.

and—as I will demonstrate below—play with the modes of representation and consumption of cinema as mass media.

Following the national trend that saw the popularisation and politicisation of anger as a marker of heroic masculinity,<sup>7</sup> the mass film established Chiranjeevi as the leading star of the Telugu film industry and defined the actor's screen image as the angry young man of Andhra Pradesh. Directors, such as A. Kodandarami Reddy and Vijaya Bapineedu, repeatedly cast the 'Megastar' in the role of the mass hero who fights against the corrupt ruling class. The early mass films of the 1980s and first half of the 1990s 'gestured towards the struggles of empowerment of the lower class-caste population, at times representing these struggles with a surprising degree of sympathy'.<sup>8</sup> In *Khaidi* and *Rustum* (A. Kodandarami Reddy, 1984), it is the farmers who suffer from the landlords' despotism. In *Gang Leader* (Vijaya Bapineedu, 1991), the unemployed youth are deprived of dignity, future prospects and justice by corrupt officials and an administrative system defined by inefficiency, nepotism and bribery. And in *Mutha Mestri* (A. Kodandarami Reddy, 1993), a rich businessman terrorises and threatens the existence of a local market with his plans to build a modern shopping complex on the site. The communities in whose name the hero fights are small and local, but often function as representatives of the common people of Andhra Pradesh and/or the Indian nation. Mass films tend to pit a united community of victimised common people, who symbolise the 'true nation', against the 'false and unjust nation' that is represented by bureaucratic structures and official representatives of the nation-state. It is the institutions of the nation-state that oppress the morally legitimate people's nation. The early mass film depicts the rich and powerful as colonisers from within.

The angry young man acts as both a representative and leader of the suppressed and marginalised people, fighting for freedom and justice.<sup>9</sup> The films often include an introductory scene or a flashback to the hero's hard childhood. The traumatic loss of parents or other family members and a life of deprivation and exhausting physical labour are among the most common themes. The protagonist's suffering is not exceptional; rather, it is representative of the suffering of a larger community.

<sup>7</sup> While Amitabh Bachchan was already established as the angry young man of popular Hindi cinema during the 1970s, a new generation of leading male actors on South Indian screens had adopted this image by the early 1980s. These new stars shared not only the career path of graduating from screen villains and antagonists to becoming the main heroes of their industries. Rajnikanth in Tamil movies, Mammooty and Mohan Lal in Malayalam cinema and Chiranjeevi in Telugu films were all successful in the role of the powerful angry young man who was valorised for displaying 'manliness' and 'toughness'. See Osella and Osella, 'Young Malayali Men'; Srinivas, *Megastar*; Maderya, 'Rage against the State'.

<sup>8</sup> Srinivas, 'Hong Kong Action Film', p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> This idea of leadership was not a mere filmy fantasy but can be linked to a 'new type of leadership... which found its legitimacy [after the 1970s] not foremost in inherited, landholding status, but in assisting villagers solving problems'. Such leadership was increasingly performed and gained by young men who were organised in youth associations with the aim of 'working for justice and development'. Price, 'Honour and Morality', pp. 284–85.

But his reaction to injustice is exceptional. Unlike the generation of his father, the rebellious angry young man does not accept suffering as his fate.<sup>10</sup> Anger against injustice is his main character trait. At the same time, the emotional style of heroism played out by the angry young man derives from the way he literally embodies suffering and resistance. Scenes of hard physical labour explain his muscle power and invincible strength; the constant fight for survival builds the hero into a strong-willed and fearless character. The hero's activism, his will to self-sacrifice and the altruistic motif of protecting his community mark his anger as virtuous. The early mass films typically set angry young men, virtuous rowdies and moral ruffians against immoral elites, an inefficient state and its corrupted institutions. They thus turn prevailing images of good and bad on their head.

The film *Tagore* (V.V. Vinayak, 2003) marks the moment when Chiranjeevi's screen image moved from that of a local leader and righteous rowdy to that of a mature leader of the masses. Director V.V. Vinayak designed the climax scene of the film to evoke a feeling community built on people's self-identification as Chiranjeevi's fans, mass media consumers and belonging to the nation of the people of Andhra Pradesh. The following analysis argues that the creation of a feeling community exceeded the representational politics of the diegesis and aimed at affecting politics beyond the screen.

The hero in *Tagore* is a professor by day and the head of the vigilante network Anti-corruption Force (ACF) by night. The ACF abducts and kills corrupt top officials. The dead bodies are found in public places along with proof of the officials' severe crimes. The vigilante actions of the ACF become a media phenomenon and are greatly approved of by the common people. The style of the hero's virtuous anger and righteous violence in *Tagore* is no longer restricted to the force of punches and kicks as in the early mass film. Rather, he pursues vigilante justice with a near bureaucratic precision. Tagore and his helpers, who he recruits from his students at the university, identify, judge and execute the 'enemies of the nation' not in a fit of rage, but according to a well-defined plan. The rational intelligence and emotional driving force that characterise the murders committed by the ACF induce fear in a whole class of corrupt state officials, provoking the state to hunt down the mysterious national heroes.

<sup>10</sup> The rejection of fate and the belief in one's agency by young men in films confirms one of the results of a study on 'National loyalties in a newly independent nation' which Josep W. Elder conducted in 1963 in Madurai and Lucknow. He interviewed boys born in 1952 and their fathers. Elder observed that the sons rejected fatalistic beliefs of their lives being 'in God's hands' and showed less belief in authoritarianism than their fathers. The nation which these 11-year-old boys imagined enabled and required more individual initiative and work. In the 1970s and 1980s, when 'Angry Young Man' films became popular in all the large cinema industries in India, boys of this generation had grown into the young men and formed the core of the audience for popular action cinema. Although the angry hero is shown to be exceptional and rebellious in the films, his beliefs resound and reconfirm mainstream ideas of patriotism and selfhood prevalent among young men from urban lower-middle class families. Elder, 'National Loyalties', pp. 85, 88.

When the police get hold of Tagore's supporting students and brutally torture them, Tagore surrenders by walking into a meeting of the very police unit tasked with capturing him. Although the police had not been able to get any information on Tagore's identity before, the sincere officer who heads the unit immediately recognises Tagore as the 'leader'. The background music that suddenly starts playing conveys a heroic ethos, and the officer praises the *ghambhīryam* (depth, seriousness, grandeur) in Tagore's voice and the *tējassu* (valour, glory, brightness) in his eyes. He praises Tagore's outstanding 'confidence' and concludes in English that Tagore 'is not a criminal, he is a creator!'—The creator of a Telugu nation.

Tagore becomes a hero. The news of his arrest and the fear that he could get the death penalty spark public outrage. Students, workers, rickshaw drivers and slum dwellers unite in the streets for spontaneous demonstrations against corruption and in support of Tagore. Even the CM of Andhra Pradesh<sup>11</sup> expresses his admiration for Tagore's 'social commitment' and approves of the people's support for their non-elected leader (*nāyakudu*). The scene depicting a conversation between the CM and Tagore highlights an emotion concept that functions as a key to the emotional relation between the hero and the mobilised crowd: *āvēdana*. Sanskrit dictionaries and Brown's Telugu dictionary (late nineteenth century) translate the concept as 'stating a complaint' or 'making known', while the noun *vedanā* has semantic links to 'pain' and 'grief'.<sup>12</sup> Online dictionaries for contemporary spoken Telugu translate the term as 'suffering' or 'agony'.<sup>13</sup> In *Tagore*, *āvēdana* means to make shared suffering and agony known through altruistic, heroic anger against injustice. The CM explains that he does not see a murderer in Tagore, but a brave leader and advocate of the people who made real the angry cry of the 'common man's suffering' (*sāmānyudī āvēdana*). Tagore replies bitterly that 'whoever gives his loud voice to the truth of justice in this country, receives this [imprisonment, death sentence] as his reward'.<sup>14</sup> What is at stake in the pending trial is not just the life of Tagore, but the people's right to express their *āvēdana* (suffering) and enact *āvēdana* (making known, outcry, being angry) through their leader and the communities loyalty towards him. Making known the suffering that results from injustice requires courage, strength and a powerful voice. In the age of mass media, *āvēdana* becomes a form of media performance, requiring a charismatic figure and the staging of his actions in a spectacular way. Tagore possesses all the qualities needed to effectively enact *āvēdana*, which the ordinary people lack. His emotional

<sup>11</sup> Although mass films also accused officials and institutions of higher ranks of corruption, the code of censorship and the moral obligations for filmmakers forbid the public defamation of the CM. In *Tagore*, the CM is shown to be a 'good person' (*manchi vadu*) and sincere politician whose many obligations make him powerless before the overwhelming amount and degree of corruption in governmental institutions.

<sup>12</sup> See Monier-Williams and Chandra, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*; Brown, *Telugu-Inglishu*.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, <http://www.telugudictionary.in> (last accessed 9 June 2016); <http://www.andhrabharati.com/dictionary/> (last accessed 9 June 2016).

<sup>14</sup> *Nyāyamani nōretthinavādiki tī dēsamlō jarigē sanmānam idhē kadha.*



performance mobilises the discontented and disenfranchised citizens into a community based on the acknowledgement of shared suffering, shared anger and shared affection for their advocate and leader. In the dialogues with the CM, this community is called a national community of the people of Andhra Pradesh (*āndhrulu, praja*); it is shown to comprise all those social groups that previous films labelled 'mass'. In an effort to contribute to the audio-visual revelation of injustice, the CM orders that every person of Andhra Pradesh have the opportunity to follow Tagore's trial via live telecast: 'the people for whom Tagore did all this, they should now know his *āvēdana*, every person of Andhra shall listen to his argument in the dispute'.<sup>15</sup>

It is typical for Telugu mass films to blur the persona of the star actor with that of the fictional hero. In *Tagore*, for example, the line is blurred when the high-ranking police officer who recognised 'the leader' for his charisma asks him for an autograph. The praised charisma proves not only Tagore to possess leadership qualities, but also Chiranjeevi. In the climax scene, director V.V. Vinayak extended this play with fiction and reality by creating a vision of how a politicisation of Chiranjeevi's fans and their transformation into a national community could facilitate Chiranjeevi's ascent to political leadership.

The scene shows a cheering citizen-crowd gathering in front of the district court to watch Tagore's trial on a giant screen that has been fixed to the front of the building. Through their presence, the people express their affection and support for the leader. Tagore even has to prevent a 'fan' from performing self-immolation, an act intended as a self-sacrificial expression of devotion, affection and support. While Tagore acts out their *āvēdana* inside, they legitimise his emotional style of heroism and leadership outside.

The images of cheering crowds and their hero thanking them for their support serve two functions. When the film was released in late September 2003, Chiranjeevi's fans knew that the images also documented the large crowd that gathered to see Chiranjeevi during the shooting of the film. About 10,000 students and fans of the 'Megastar' came to the campus of the Sri Venkateshwara University in Tirupati on 31 August 2003 to participate in the making of the film.<sup>16</sup> For the fans, the climactic film scene showed both Tagore thanking the people of Andhra Pradesh and Chiranjeevi greeting his fans. The scene further equates the fictional situation of the public viewing of Tagore's trial with the viewing of Chiranjeevi's film in a cinema. The images switch back and forth between the perspective of Tagore's audience, the full frame of what they are supposed to be seeing on the giant screen and the perspective from within the courtroom, putting film viewers into the position of the ultimate witness. While Tagore presents evidence of the corruption of the officials in the courtroom and questions their moral authority, the people outside comment

<sup>15</sup> *Ē prajala kosam Tagore idantha chesthunnādō, ā prajalaki athani āvēdana teliyāli, prathi āndhrudu athani vādana vināli.*

<sup>16</sup> Idlebrain, 'Lathi Charge on Chiru Fans'.



on the proceedings with loud cheers, claps and whistles—in the same manner that fans in cinemas cheer, clap and whistle for their hero's onscreen 'punch dialogues'. Over the course of the trial, Tagore's acts of violence are justified as expressions of the people's will and their search for justice. His visible anger towards corruption and loud proclamation that the people have suffered from its consequences are glorified as the vicarious enactment of the people of Andhra Pradesh's *āvēdana*. As the density and insistence of the political and moral messages in the hero's speech grow more intense, so too do the scene's audio-visual dynamics. The increasing tempo of the speech, the rise in volume and the increasing speed of visual cuts as well as the surging background music induce the audiences' active involvement in the scene, the intention being to 'move' the viewer. This enables the spectators in the cinema during the screening of *Tagore* to identify with the mobilised citizen-crowd. Chiranjeevi's fans become the people of Andhra Pradesh.

The representational politics entailed by the cinematic equation of audiences, fans and the citizens of Andhra Pradesh into one imagined feeling community attached to Tagore-Chiranjeevi as its leader proved effective in garnering support for Chiranjeevi to become a political leader beyond the screen. Despite the actor's repeated public denial of intentions to enter into electoral politics in the years before 2007, popular films continued to shape the star's image as that of the ideal political leader, while the star himself did various things aimed at establishing himself as a public figure of moral authority and social commitment.

### **The Angry Leader Builds the Compassionate National Community**

In the wake of the crisis of the mass film in the mid-1990s, Chiranjeevi and the Telugu mass film increasingly coupled virtuous anger with compassion to further define the protagonist's emotional style of heroism and leadership.<sup>17</sup> One aspect of the decline of the mass film in public esteem—which resulted in a series of flops—was the increasing criticism of cinema as a medium that glorified and promoted violence. In the first half of the 1990s, mass films had indeed begun to increase the number of scenes that celebrated excessive violence, while at the same time, fan clubs of big film stars were accused of criminal activities such as 'black-marketing tickets and engaging in rowdyism'.<sup>18</sup> Taking up the role of a socially responsible leader, 'Chiranjeevi effected a series of pedagogic and disciplinary moves' intended to 'transform the fan into a responsible admirer committed to socially purposeful activities'.<sup>19</sup> The official fan magazine *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, the first issue of which was published in August 1989, promoted 'social service as the most important fan activity' that distinguishes the 'rowdy' from the 'real fan'.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For more aspects on the crisis of the mass film, see Srinivas, *Megastar*, Chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

In 1998, the star founded the Chiranjeevi Charitable Trust, which runs the fairly successful Chiranjeevi Blood and Eye Banks. Films that cast Chiranjeevi in the role of the hero featured requests to the audience to donate blood or eyes. The film *Tagore* showed a text board just before the intermission of the film, while the catchy song ‘Parrārey’ from the film *Stalin* (A.R. Murugadoss, 2006) invited viewers to donate blood and eyes. Exhibiting compassion through social service and charity was by no means new. This is common for film stars and fan clubs who want to link the star’s name and image with ideas of goodness. I will argue more extensively below that film stars and politicians in South India perform social leadership as a form of patronage.<sup>21</sup> Chiranjeevi’s exhortations to his fans to help people in need and do social service succeeded in increasing the visibility of his own charity and the fan associations’ acts of social service in the local media at the precise moment that criticisms of violence in cinema were growing more intense.<sup>22</sup> The adoption of an emotional style based on compassion and the promotion of social service campaigns can both be interpreted as attempts to preserve Chiranjeevi’s legitimacy as a star and his image as a leader and moral authority. However, the shift in Chiranjeevi’s emotional style from anger and rebellion to compassion and social service was not a complete U-turn. Rather, it might be understood as a development rooted in the concepts of altruism and protection that had informed the virtuous anger of Chiranjeevi as the angry young man in the early Telugu mass film.

S.V. Srinivas argues that the makers of mass films managed to overcome a thematic ‘blockage’—which he sees as a major reason for the genre’s dive in popularity—by abandoning the stereotyped rebel and outlaw heroes and casting Chiranjeevi in roles that conveyed maturity, status and social authority.<sup>23</sup> This shift from the screen image of the underdog, rowdy and rebel to socially respected figures of honour and authority required the star to act and represent a different set of emotions. Although virtuous anger continued to inform Chiranjeevi’s characters and his onscreen emotional style, concepts such as love, affection, care, service and compassion increasingly determined the core of the stories.

The film *Stalin—Man for the Society* (2006), a ‘super hit’ at the box office, used anger and compassion to characterise the hero in a more coherent way than any other film. The film provides an example of how anger could be used to mobilise compassion and affection in the framework of a patriotic ideology. The catchy song ‘Parrarē Parrarē’<sup>24</sup> conveys the message of the film in condensed form at the beginning, immediately after the introductory fight scene. Its first verse advises listeners to cultivate fearlessness and physical strength. It employs metaphors that popularly

<sup>21</sup> On the performances of social service and charity of Telugu actor N.T. Rama Rao and Tamil actor M.G. Ramachandran, see Srinivas, *Politics as Performance*; Pandian, *The Image Trap*. On social service conducted by fan clubs in Tamil Nadu, compare Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*.

<sup>22</sup> Srinivas, ‘Devotion and Defiance in Fan Activity’, p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> Srinivas, *Megastar*, pp. 190–238.

<sup>24</sup> Lyrics by Anantha Sriram, music by Mani Sharma.

belong to the semantics of virtuous anger, such as the exhortation to ‘send the juice of courage into every nerve of your heart’ and ‘make your muscles burn with the power of fire’.<sup>25</sup> But the second verse teaches that ‘the real devil is your own anger’, which should be ‘hunted’ and ‘destroyed’.<sup>26</sup> Only sharp thought and patience could enable the arrow of lord *Rām* and the character of lord *Hanumān* to find their place in a young man’s blessed soul.<sup>27</sup> It further advises viewers to always help others and suggests that the performance of compassionate acts would also be beneficial for them, as it would earn them respect and affection.<sup>28</sup> ‘If you donate your eyes, you will live for a second time’, and ‘by donating blood, the receivers will look up to you as to their close blood relatives’, a relationship that the images show to be as close as that between parents and their children.<sup>29</sup> As mentioned above, the lines ultimately advertise the Chiranjeevi Eye and Blood Bank. After admonishing viewers to manage their anger and nurture patience and compassion, it connects individual self-improvement with a patriotic ideology that represents the idea of the Indian nation as a community of peaceful young men. The refrain—*peace for the nation and peace for the people/jana gana mana*<sup>30</sup>/*together we say/andaru kalisi ī desam kōsam cētulu kalipina either way*<sup>31</sup>—is accompanied by images of young men in jeans and T-shirts marching in a colourful procession, holding small Indian national flags and being showered with flowers by women dressed in colourful saris. In front of the procession dances Stalin, played by Chiranjeevi, as their leader.<sup>32</sup> The people and the leader both adopt the normative formula of cultivating anger in the body and compassion in the mind. Nevertheless, the emotional style of the leader is different. The chorus, which represents the nation of young men, demands: ‘Oh soldier come fast/we welcome you and will be your selfless servants’.<sup>33</sup> For the leader as soldier, the performance of hot, eruptive and violent anger against enemies is not a vice, but a virtue. Unlike the national community of young men,

<sup>25</sup> *Gunde naramlōki / dhammu rasam pampi / kanda bhalamlōne / nippu gundem nimpi.*

<sup>26</sup> *Asalu dayyam ante nī kōpamē / chedunu ventanē ventādi campara / sahānam vēthutō kōpanne tempāra.*

<sup>27</sup> *Rāmabānam antē nī ālocanē...ānjanēyudantē nī sahānamē.*

<sup>28</sup> The study on the concepts of honour and morality conducted by Pamela Price in a village in Andhra Pradesh in 2003 shows that people conceptualised a person of honour and respect as someone ‘who helps others’ and ‘who protects people from difficulties, perhaps by lending money or helping them cope with their difficulties’. Price, ‘Honour and Morality’, pp. 276–78.

<sup>29</sup> *Dīpamalle nuvvu nī cūpivara / rendusārlu mottamam nuvvu jīvincara / raktam pancina kannolla tīruga / raktam iccina ninne cūstārugā.*

<sup>30</sup> Indian national anthem.

<sup>31</sup> ‘We all come together and join our hands for this country in either way.’

<sup>32</sup> The identity of actor and screen character is again blurred by both visuals and lyrics. When the chorus of the song asks their leader how he gains his strength and performs the powerful punch in his speech, the lead singer responds that it is the fans in front of the silver screen who support him (*ekkadiidhi bās nī palukuku ī pancu / venditera mundhara vennutaththē fans unthe*). The line is obviously meant to evoke whistling from the Chiranjeevi fans in the theatre.

<sup>33</sup> *Salā salā rāvōyi ō sainikudai rāvōyi / salām salām koththi nī sēvakulamautāmōyi.*

the leader is supposed to use his angry body for the active defence of the nation. The angry leader punishes those who do not adhere to the moral national code, and the film shows images of how Stalin defends India's controversial 'territorial integrity' in Kashmir against Pakistani soldiers. The concept of the soldier also encompasses the idea of the leader being a servant to the nation. The lead singer responds to the chorus: 'It is men like you from whom the soldier emerges/I am the selfless servant'.<sup>34</sup> The line has a double meaning: First, the leader thanks the men for their support and promises his service in return. The leader thus becomes the servant. The community and the leader perform their roles in corresponding emotional styles of service and loyalty. Second, it reminds the young men that any of them could emerge as a leader himself one day. It thus makes sense for them to cultivate a strong body capable of enacting anger heroically, even though compassion and affection is the mode of interaction of people at the base of the nation.

As in *Tagore*, the film *Stalin* conveys shared affection for the leader as a unifying force, all the while placing great weight on the need for love between citizen subjects, who perform the Indian nation through acts of compassion. The film ends with a written exhortation in the form of a personally signed letter featuring a photograph of the star addressed to the viewers, asking them to implement a help-three-people-in-need scheme in reality, which hero Stalin is shown to popularise with great difficulty among the fictional people of Andhra Pradesh. For the implementation of his ideas for social change, the leader depends on the people's support. With *Stalin*, the idealised national community of the mass film moves from a community of shared suffering and anger against corruption (as in *Tagore*) to a community that is unified by the mutual love and compassion, as well as affection and loyalty towards the compassionate and angry leader.

### **The Compassionate Politician and the Angry Voters**

During a media conference on 17 August 2008, Chiranjeevi formally announced his decision to enter electoral politics. Chiranjeevi framed his decision as an act of compassion and social responsibility, and

insisted that he was entering politics because he was being called upon to do so by the people. He drew attention to a suicide note left by a fan/supporter (in February 2008) appealing to the star to improve the lives of common people by entering politics.<sup>35</sup>

The set-up of the public meeting in Tirupati on 26 August 2008 where Chiranjeevi announced the formation of his Praja Rajyam (People's Rule) party is an example of the way he staged himself as the people's leader, even before the election campaign:

<sup>34</sup> *Ilānthōlā nundē ō sainikudostādōyi / alānthōlā nundē ni sēvakudavutānōyi.*

<sup>35</sup> Srinivas, *Megastar*, p. 127.

“‘[W]ho called me into politics? It was you”, he said dramatically. “It should be rule by the people, for the people.””<sup>36</sup> An estimated crowd of one million people had gathered to witness the event.<sup>37</sup> Chiranjeevi’s speech was a choreographed spectacle that was interspersed with film clips on a giant screen. The images evoked the hero of the mass film as the representative and leader of the common people and were intended to remind the spectator-citizens of Chiranjeevi in his role as the angry mass hero who shares, understands and resolves the problems and suffering of the poor and marginalised.

Apart from using famous lines of dialogues and images from his early films, including a portrayal of him as a farmer dragging a plough and as a soldier,<sup>38</sup> Chiranjeevi seems to have avoided the bodily and rhetorical gestures characteristic of the angry leader he used to represent in the mass film. His public performances and the images that show him as a politician staged his emotional style of leadership as being characterised by his compassion.

The comparison of two posters demonstrates the visual and semantic changes in the star’s public image that were used to help make his persona and party conform to the emotional conventions of electoral campaigns:

Figure 1 shows ‘Megastar’ Chiranjeevi in the role of Stalin. His narrowed red eyes and lowered eye brows and his crossed arms combine with the background

**Figure 1**  
Megastar

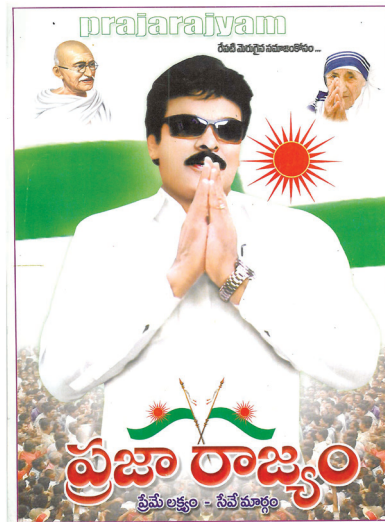


<sup>36</sup> Das, ‘Tirupati Premiere for Chiranjeevi’s Party’.

<sup>37</sup> Anonymus, ‘Chiranjeevi Launches “Prajya Rajyam”’.

<sup>38</sup> Das, ‘Tirupati Premiere for Chiranjeevi’s Party’.

**Figure 2**  
Praja Rajyam<sup>39</sup>



that looks like a wall of fire to evoke the canonical image of the mass hero as angry man. Figure 2 depicts Chiranjeevi as a political leader and as a founder of the Praja Rajyam party. His folded hands, which greet the beholder in the humble gesture of a ‘namaste’, are at the centre of the poster. His face hints at a mild smile. Only the upper half of the politician’s body is visible and appears as if it were growing out of a crowd of supporters or fans—the *praja* (people, citizens) as *abhimānulu* (fans, admirers)<sup>40</sup>—who occupy the background of the bottom third of the poster. Chiranjeevi is dressed in a spotless white shirt, wears sunglasses, a watch and a ring. His dress and accessories mark him as a respectable person (*pedda manishi*), while the glasses convey his stardom in popular cinema. Images of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa flank Chiranjeevi’s head. As patron saints, they guard the party and politician and seem to inform his actions and emotional style. Mahatma

<sup>39</sup> I purchased both posters in 2013 in a gift shop near the main bus stand in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. The posters carry no information on who designed, published or printed the images. The Praja Rajyam poster was most probably designed and distributed by the political party itself. It resembles other materials for political advertisement that the party used in its short period of existence between 2008 and 2011.

<sup>40</sup> In the context of South Indian actor-politicians, the concept of *abhimānulu* describes the emotional commitment of voters to their leader as that of fans, admirers, aspirants and devotees. Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda has shown in her dissertation how devotional films in Telugu cinema and the film star N. T. Rama Rao created the citizen-devotee whose connection to its leader is *bhakti* (devotional love) and *abhimānam* (admiration, fandom). Bhrugubanda, *Genealogies of the Citizen-devotee*. On ‘Fan Bhakti’ in South India see also chapter 6 in Prasad, *Cine-politics*.



Gandhi's white attire and spectacles are a visual repetition of Chiranjeevi's dress; Mother Teresa's folded hands are replicated by Chiranjeevi's gesture. Gandhi and Mother Teresa are popular icons of service to the Indian nation, selfless service to the poor and, above all, altruism and compassion. The poster is headed by the name of Chiranjeevi's party, Praja Rajyam ('people's rule'), along with an electoral slogan of the party in Telugu: *repati merugaina samājakosam...* ('for a better society of tomorrow...'). The waving party flag with a red sun rising from a green horizon into a white background takes up the background space between the patron saints and the people at the bottom. The name of the party is printed again in red Telugu letters at the bottom of the picture, crowned by two crossed party flags. The slogan (in blue letters) below emphasises the concepts of love and service as defining the relationship between the people and their leader: *premē lakshyam—sēvē mārgam*.<sup>41</sup>

The poster continues to evoke the *praja* as a feeling community united by its members' love of, and affection for, the leader, as depicted in *Tagore* and *Stalin*. But it references neither shared suffering nor anger, which were crucial to the depiction of Chiranjeevi as a political leader and the formation of a feeling community around him in the movies. The visual elements, the slogans and Chiranjeevi's expression make the interconnected concepts of love, service, altruism and compassion the comprehensive theme of the poster. It therefore fits Chiranjeevi and his party into another, fairly classic emotional style of leadership, namely that of patronage.<sup>42</sup>

As the 'little kingdoms' of Madras Presidency were gradually transformed into the zamindari system of local patron–client communities under British colonial rule over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the landholding elites preserved practices and concepts of older monarchical culture that expressed their social and cultural status.<sup>43</sup> The historian Pamela Price, who conducted several studies on the history and current politics of patronage among Telugu speaking communities in South India, argues that 'the organization of monarchical culture in the Old Regime has continued, in India's still highly segmented society, to affect to a certain extent the way personal leadership is conceptualised today'.<sup>44</sup> Emotion concepts, such as honour (*gauravam*) and respect (*maryāda*) and emotional practices of largess, charity and compassion, which historically defined the zamindar as a good patron, are still viewed as qualities of leadership in contemporary South India. The emotional style of patronage is usually ascribed to,

<sup>41</sup> 'The aim is love—the way is serving.'

<sup>42</sup> On love and compassion as leadership qualities in the electoral politics of Tamil Nadu (namely Jayalalithaa), see Bate, *Tamil Oratory*, p. 119. For love and generosity as contemporary leadership qualities in Andhra Pradesh, see Price and Srinivas, 'Patronage and Autonomy'.

<sup>43</sup> Berkemer, *Little Kingdoms*; Price, 'Kingly Models'; Mines, *Public Faces, Private Voices*; Price and Srinivas, 'Patronage and Autonomy'; Price, 'Raja-Dharma'.

<sup>44</sup> Price, 'Kingly Models', p. 568.



and evoked by, people who act as *pedda manushulu*—literally the ‘big men’ of social and political authority.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike other politicians and public leaders in Andhra Pradesh, Chiranjeevi has until now not been publicly called a *pedda manishi*—neither in the media, nor by his fans, nor by those who benefitted from his acts of compassion, charity and patronage. There might be two reasons for this: The first concerns the representation of age. *Pedda manushulu* are usually elderly men who derive a certain amount of their respect from the fact that they are ‘elders’ and experienced persons. Because of his screen image as an angry young man, Chiranjeevi was publicly viewed as someone who represented youth. Second, Chiranjeevi has already been publicly addressed as ‘leader’, *nāyakudu* (leader), *annayya* (elder brother) and as the ‘Megastar’. These titles are more than sufficient to bolster his public honour, authority and respect, more than sufficient to give the image of an emotional style that corresponds to that of a *pedda manishi*.<sup>46</sup>

In the following, I suggest that Chiranjeevi’s shift towards compassion as his defining emotional style can be understood as an adaptation of conventionalised leadership qualities. While I argue that the emotional performance of leadership as a form of compassionate patronage should be seen as a continuation of feudal power practices, I nevertheless show how political actors have appropriated, and thus changed, the emotion concepts and practices of patronage. In fact, popular Telugu cinema—and the mass film in particular—is one of the major cultural forces contributing to the appropriation and ‘persistence of the feudal’.<sup>47</sup> S.V. Srinivas has shown how films starring the Telugu star NTR in the late 1970s and early 1980s created an ‘obsession’ with an imagined feudal past and invented modern ‘feudal figures of authority’. After the shift to popular images of rebellion and the image of the angry mass hero as the ideal political leader during the 1980s and early 1990s, the feudal enjoyed a new wave of popularity in the late 1990s. Rebellion, anger and defiance played a less prominent (albeit still present) role in defining the hero, while ‘positive feudal values’ were used for ‘qualifying him for a leadership role, which in any case is always the ultimate end of the mass film hero’.<sup>48</sup>

A study of patronage and autonomy by Pamela Price and Duci Srinivas based on interviews conducted between 2003 and 2012 summarises what common people in

<sup>45</sup> For a historical account on the figure of the *pedda manishi* in a Telugu-speaking merchant community, see Mines, ‘The Political Economy of Patronage’, pp. 51–54. For a more detailed argument centred on the historical semantics of the ‘cultural concepts’ that constitute leadership and authority in the Telugu- and Tamil-speaking communities of South India, see Price, ‘Kingly Models’, p. 568.

<sup>46</sup> Sara Dickey has argued that practices of patronage and kingly charisma are important factors for the ‘production of film-star politicians’ in South India. She derives her argument from studying the ‘charity’ and ‘altruism’ of the former actor and chief minister of Tamil Nadu M. G. Ramachandran between the 1960s and 1980s with reference to the figure of the *periyar*, as institutional big men are called in Tamil. Dickey, ‘The Politics of Adulation’.

<sup>47</sup> Srinivas, ‘Persistence of the Feudal’.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

South India<sup>49</sup> expected from a 'good' leader:<sup>50</sup> The voters expressed their 'desire to vote for a selfless person' who would render efficient service to the people, prove his 'dedication to the poor' and display a strong 'will to self-sacrifice'. Price and Srinivas show that the hope of electing a 'good person' of 'superior moral character' to power arose from a widely shared feeling of distrust towards politicians and discontent directed against corruption, nepotism and inefficiency.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, even the angry hero of the early mass film embodied all these leadership qualities. But Chiranjeevi chose to use the linguistic and visual semantics of compassion coupled with 'class' for his electoral campaign rather than anger and the aesthetics of 'mass'.<sup>52</sup>

Chiranjeevi's acts of charity and support of charitable events and institutions are the most obvious ways he displays compassion and fosters an image of being a patron. In his research on the individualism and subjectivity of 'institutional big men' in the Telugu speaking merchant community of the Arya Vyasya in Chennai, the anthropologist Mattison Mines traces the public exhibition of charity in its modern form back to the first half of the nineteenth century. *Pedda manushulu* of this community established charitable institutions 'for the welfare of the people' in order to strengthen and expand their power.<sup>53</sup> The visible enactment of altruism serves as a moral justification for the social status and power of the *pedda manishi* and manifests his position as a patron by making a display of his wealth and enlarging his circle of clients. Charity is also the most honourable form of generosity. Mines informs us that generosity 'is an important feature of south Indian public life and acts of philanthropy are common and widely evident. Generosity is an individual attribute that establishes and maintains relationships and his highly valued in politicians and leaders of all sorts.'<sup>54</sup>

Pamela Price concludes from her studies that a person of superior status and power sustains his social position through his capacity to further the 'well-being of others, either through largess and/or command of labor'.<sup>55</sup> Chiranjeevi's exhortation—both on the screen, as in *Stalin*, and off—to his fan clubs to conduct social service and help others is at once performances of respectable 'goodness' and displays of his capacity as a social leader to command his followers to perform social 'labour'. The politics of care and service reproduce kingly models of behaviour that inform the relationship between film stars and their fans in South

<sup>49</sup> The study was conducted in villages in the region of Telangana. Before the formation of Telangana as the 29th state of India in June 2014 the Telugu-speaking region was part of the state Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>50</sup> Price and Srinivas, 'Patronage and Autonomy'.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 220–29.

<sup>52</sup> In the preparations for the 2014 elections, it was Chiranjeevi's younger brother Pawan Kalyan who employed the cinematic style of the angry mass hero to promote his newly founded party Jana Sena (People's Army).

<sup>53</sup> Mines, 'The Political Economy of Patronage', pp. 51–54.

<sup>54</sup> Mines, *Public Faces, Private Voices*, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Price, 'Kingly Models', p. 571.

India on various levels. Just as the subjects are bound to the monarch and his family by the virtue (and regime) of loyalty, Chiranjeevi's fans (and particularly the fan associations) express and perform their loyalty to 'Megastar' and the 'Mega family' by orchestrating rivalries with fans of other actors, guarding the star's public honour and performing gestures of self-sacrifice.<sup>56</sup> The 'Star dynasties' that compete in the market of Telugu cinema also compete on the political platform by running their own parties or by supporting a particular party as a family.<sup>57</sup> When Chiranjeevi's Praja Rajyam party failed to become a major political force in Andhra Pradesh during the 2009 elections, fans who had voted for Chiranjeevi expressed their anger against those 'false fans' who had been disloyal to their leader. The cinematic use of the concept of *darshan* in particular articulates the emotional relations between fan-citizens and actor-politicians in terms of kingly worship.<sup>58</sup> In the same way that it used to be the duty of the king to give his subjects the chance to view his auspicious presence,<sup>59</sup> Chiranjeevi's public appearances are celebrated by his fans as an opportunity to have a *darshan* of their idol. The entry scenes of the hero in a mass film are celebrated by directors and fans as exceptional moments of visual pleasure. The star himself and his images are publicly worshipped. 'In return for protective services as well as auspicious and meritorious qualities, the subject of a king owed him, theoretically, devoted service.'<sup>60</sup> In the contemporary context of Andhra Pradesh's person-centred patronage democracy, the citizen-fan as imagined by popular cinema owed his vote to the star-politician when Chiranjeevi announced his ambitions of becoming the CM of Andhra Pradesh. But the fans proved to be defiant.

In the 2009 elections, Chiranjeevi was on the ballot in Tirupati and Palakollu. The results for the Praja Rajyam Party were unexpectedly poor. Although Chiranjeevi won in Tirupati, the party was beaten badly in the East and West Godavari districts, which were supposed to be reliable strongholds. Rumours of corruption in the party emerged. Chiranjeevi further 'lost respect' as a leader<sup>61</sup> and was accused of hypocrisy when he merged his party with the Indian National Congress on 6 February 2011. Despite his fame, popularity and unchallenged stardom, Chiranjeevi could not take any votes from Y.S. Rajashekara Reddy (YSR), who had been serving as a CM since 2004 and was elected for his second term in 2009. YSR represented himself an exemplary *pedda manishi*. And unlike Chiranjeevi, YSR had a long career in politics behind him and a clear political agenda. The corruption of the 'big' Congress politician was endured and even denied by his voters, while expressions of admiration for his strong defence against

<sup>56</sup> Srinivas, *Megastar*.

<sup>57</sup> Srinivas, 'Persistence of the Feudal'.

<sup>58</sup> Bhugubanda, *Genealogies of the Citizen-devotee*.

<sup>59</sup> Price, 'Kingly Models', pp. 562–63.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 563.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

perceived threats to the prevailing political order (such as his military actions against radical Maoist Naxalite activists) and expressions of love and gratitude for his policies of charity and compassion dominated the media coverage during his term.<sup>62</sup> The declarations of loyalty to YSR even increased after he died in a helicopter crash in September 2009.<sup>63</sup>

In political cultures of patronage, the feelings of generosity, compassion and charity displace a certain degree of responsibility to care for the people from the institutions of the state to individual personalities.<sup>64</sup> The angry hero of the Telugu mass films represented a force that was aimed at overcoming the corrupt structures of the nation-state in order to form a people's nation without suffering. The compassionate patron compensates for the shortcomings of the state that he represents through his personal goodness. While the film hero represents the fantastic 'power' of the rebel to mobilise popular appeal, the patron uses his political power for the good through conventionalised, bureaucratic means. In comparison to Chiranjeevi the compassionate angry young man, Chiranjeevi the compassionate politician looked disappointingly powerless. Adding to this was the fact that the actor turned out to be a bad speaker on the political stage. His speeches could not arouse the excitement and cheers that his onscreen punch dialogues had evoked.

While the significance of the politics of patronage in the organisation of local communities in villages or urban neighbourhoods has been in steady decline since the early 1990s, notions of patronage continue to inform person-centred politics at the level of the state.<sup>65</sup> The history of Chiranjeevi's emotional style shows that popular Telugu cinema is a cultural space where concepts of community and leadership shaped by political patronage and person-centred politics are as much challenged as preserved and reinforced.

### Conclusion

In this article, I argued that the Telugu mass film's depiction of the people of Andhra Pradesh as a feeling community depended strongly on the image of the leader and his emotional style. Chiranjeevi's image changed from that of the angry local

<sup>62</sup> Mines notes that the concept of generosity in the context of South India's systems of patronage follows a 'karmic logic that holds that acts of generosity counter sin'. The patronage style of political leadership accordingly enabled YSR to balance moral and legal transgressions with the display of generosity and populist social schemes. See Mines, 'The Political Economy of Patronage', p. 49.

<sup>63</sup> See Price and Srinivas, 'Patronage and Autonomy', pp. 232–33.

<sup>64</sup> See also the introduction to this issue by Margrit Pernau.

<sup>65</sup> Young people increasingly 'rely on education and new occupations, such as government-service, to achieve success'. Thus their 'need for big-men connections to establish their trustworthiness or to act as brokers on their behalf' decreases. 'Bureaucracy, measured in terms of standards established by certification, law, and codified procedure..., grows in importance as a mechanism for maintaining reliability and provides alternatives to the wrath of big-men for countering transgressions and restoring order'. Mines, 'The Political Economy of Patronage', p. 123.

leader to that of the compassionate leader of a national community. The rise of the 'mass' from a specific low-class community into the embodiment of the Telugu nation itself is revealed to be an anti-democratic ideology. Political pluralism and individual feelings of suffering or anger are silenced in the imagination of a homogeneous mass-nation united by affection and compassion. Popular films can indeed conceptualise, popularise, rehearse and even teach emotions, and can thus enable certain community feelings beyond the screen. Mass media in general is a powerful tool for synchronising emotions, as the film *Tagore* shows, and is therefore an important aspect of the study of feeling communities. But there is no guarantee that audiences will choose to practice these feelings in different contexts. Citizens as voters in the election of 2009 in Andhra Pradesh were presented with different offers of leadership and belonging. Just as Chiranjeevi chose not to perform his 'angry' cinematic emotional style of leadership as a politician, so too did many of his fans choose to deny him their support during the elections—possibly because the leader and the mass were no longer on the same emotional wavelength.

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