

# Voices from the Margins: A Multidimensional Reading of Dalit Masculinities and Contemporary Telugu Cinema | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

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This is a text transcription for the recorded event “Voices from the Margins: A Multidimensional Reading of Dalit Masculinities and Contemporary Telugu Cinema” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The event was recorded on June 11, 2025, and was moderated by Andrea Paras. The guest speaker was Bhagya Shree Nadamala.

Transcript:

**Andrea Paras:**

OK, let's get started. Welcome everybody to this event. My name is Andrea Paras. I'm the director of the Guelph Institute of Development Studies at the University of Guelph.

To begin, I'd like to begin with the land acknowledgement. And so, I'll start by saying that I'm grateful to acknowledge that the University of Guelph resides on the traditional and ancestral territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit.

It is also located within the territory of the Between the Lakes purchase, which is also known as Treaty 3. This treaty was 1st negotiated between the Mississaugas of the Credit and the British Crown in 1784. But before that treaty was signed there was a pre-existing treaty called the Dish with One Spoon Treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabeg peoples and their allies that committed them to living peaceably together, and over the years. Newcomers to this territory have also been integrated into the terms of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty. The Dish with One Spoon Treaty requires those of us who reside and work here to take responsibility for being stewards of the land and creating good relationships with each other.

And so it's in that spirit that I welcome you all to this event as we continue to think about how to make good relationships with each other and take responsibility for our work and play here on this land.

This event is being presented by CIRCLE, which is the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement. This research centre was established in February 2020, at the University of Guelph. It aims to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting edge research on India, South Asia, and their diasporas. It showcases, advocates, catalyzes, and fosters, equitable, respectful, and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being. And if you're interested in learning more about CIRCLE, we've just dropped a link to the CIRCLE website in the chat.

Related to that, I'd like to draw attention to a call for abstracts for the 4th annual CIRCLE Graduate South Asia Conference, which is taking place in the fall of 2025. So there is a call for abstracts that is being released. So graduate students who might be in the room. You are welcome to submit your proposals for an abstract to participate in that conference, and we've also dropped the link to the call for abstracts into the chat.

Just a few words on etiquette, and how we're going to be running this event before I introduce our distinguished speaker, so I'll let you know straight off that we are recording the event. I'll ask you all the participants to remain on mute and keep your video off during the presentation. You may type your questions into the chat, and we'll reserve time after the lecture for a question and answer period. During the question and answer period, we'll look at the questions in the chat, or you're also free to raise your hand and unmute yourself and ask your questions. But you can type your questions into the chat at any time during the lecture, and we'll make sure that your questions—you have an opportunity to ask that question.

So I would like to welcome our speaker today. Bhagya Shree Nadamala, who is presenting on *Voices from the Margins: A Multidimensional Reading of Dalit Masculinities in Contemporary Telugu Cinema*. Bhagya Shree Nadamala is a UGC Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Patna. She has been a Visiting Scholar at the University of Toronto Scarborough in the fall of 2024 as part of the SPARC project titled *Precarious Lives, Postcolonial Fiction and the Anthropocene*.

For her PhD dissertation, she is working on Dalit women's representation in Telugu cinema between 1990 to 2021. Her areas of interests include gender studies, Dalit literature, ecofeminism and Telugu cinema. She has published with *Feminist Review*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* and *Media Asia* among other publications. It is a great pleasure to welcome you virtually to the University of Guelph, Bhagya Shree. Thank you so much for joining us today and I'll pass things over to you for the lecture and we'll look forward to hearing about your work and the conversation afterwards.

### Bhagya Shree Nadamala:

Thank you so much Dr. Andrea for the generous introduction. Greetings to everyone joining us from India, Canada and other global locations. It's an honour to present my work titled *Voices from the Margins: A Multidimensional Reading of Dalit Masculinities and Contemporary Telugu Cinema*. I'm grateful to CIRCLE for this opportunity and I look forward to your reflections or questions, if any, towards the end of the presentation. Yeah. Before I delve into the main arguments of my presentation, let me briefly walk you through the structure of my today's talk.

I'll be beginning by outlining the research questions, followed by a quick conceptual introduction to caste and masculinities. I will then attempt to situate this discussion within Telugu cinema and try to trace masculinity construction over the decades. The core focus of

my presentation would be on why a multidimensional reading of Dalit masculinities is necessary, followed by its analysis in select cinematic texts. I will also attempt to explore the construct of mobile or fluid masculinities within the Dalit discourse, and finally conclude.

To frame the scope of my analysis, I will begin with two central research questions. First, how did the select cinematic text substantiate the role of Dalit men as oppressed oppressors highlighting both their assertion of authority and the challenges posed by upper-caste dominance? Second, how did the films *Rangasthala* and *Palasa* use cinematographic techniques to highlight the fluidity of masculinity in the Dalit context? Here I'm particularly interested to look at how forms such as camera angles, mise-en-scène and narrative structures do not function just as storytelling devices, but they actually are deliberate interventions, if we could analyze these particular frames.

Introducing caste and masculinities: A critical understanding of gender is incomplete without including other social identity demarcations, as Connell in her book *Masculinities* mentions, we cannot understand class, race, or global inequality without constantly moving towards gender, noting that gender intersects better or rather interacts with race and class.

In the context of South Asia, specifically India, caste and ethnicity play a major role in deciding men's social status. Not just that, but also their performance of masculinity. As Dasgupta and Gokulsing note, lives of men in different parts of India are often impacted, deeply impacted in fact by caste, class, religion and sexual orientation. If you look at research on Indian masculinities, it has undergone significant changes with works from Nandy, Chopra et al., Osella & Osella and others. Nandy's work, especially *The Intimate Enemy*, talks about how colonialism has reshaped the Indian masculinities, because it started imposing western ideals of masculinity. On the other hand, it started to devalue the Indigenous male identities.

Chopra et al. looks at diverse South Asian masculinity but interestingly also noting the absence of Dalit men in the mainstream masculine discourse. Osella & Osella talk about South Indian masculinities through class, migration, kinship but without paying any attention to caste. There also been other recent contributions from the works of Chakraborty, Banerjee and Srivastava. But this entire chunk of works has definitely helped in advancing the study of possibilities in India. But the issue of caste has been under theorized or rather become overshadowed within the broader category of South Asian masculinity. Even if caste is mentioned, it is just mentioned in relation to upper caste norms or it is just a part of the larger social construct.

In recent times we do have few academic interventions on Dalit masculinity thanks to Gabriel. He is one of the first or pioneers of Dalit masculinity studies in India. He said wait, no, look, we cannot evaluate/look at Dalit masculinity using the same paradigms that we used to evaluate upper caste masculinity because upper caste masculinity is shaped using the ideals of domination. It's shaped by control, it's shaped by privilege, whereas you find Dalit masculinity being shaped by humiliation. It's shaped by exclusion and Yengde took this

Dalit masculinity discourse to regional cinema. And his work opens up the space to ask the question, what does it feel for Dalit men to be in a cultural landscape dominated by upper caste norms or dominated by upper caste representations?

Dhabak takes this Dalit masculinity discourse to Dalit autobiographical narratives to see how Dalit men articulate their own masculinity in their own forms or in their own words. Mukerjee and Jha use a post structural lens to analyze Dalit masculinity in select narratives. And building on this, in this current presentation, I make an attempt to analyze the positionality of Dalit men, specifically in the context of their practice of mobile masculinity and how their gender performance becomes fluid. Just to mention mobile masculinity, what mobile muscularity is all about. It's all about how Dalit men are oppressed due to this historical caste structure on one hand. On the other hand, they enact the same oppression to their Dalit women or other lower caste men from their own community. So, their performance is fluid.

To better understand or to better substantiate Dalit masculinity, let me provide a brief overview of Dalit men's positionality in the Indian caste system. The caste system is a complex phenomenon that functions as a hierarchical social stratification.

It is primarily structured around the notions of purity and pollution. Originating from the ancient Chaturvarnya or the four-fold system which organized society based on the occupational division of labour. This modern-day caste system delineates from four varnas. We have Brahmins who are the priests, Kshatriyas who are the warriors, Vaishyas who are the traders, and Shudras who are the laborers. Outside this caste hierarchy exists the untouchables or who are generally referred to as Dalits.

I am not going into the detailed historical and sociological nomenclature as to why they are Dalits or Ati-shudras or Panchamas, but constitutionally they are recognized as scheduled castes. And as Rajni Kothari points out that Dalits continue to experience deep turmoil and face constant humiliation even in the 21st century. They are seen performing menial inhumane occupations like manual scavenging, which is a major concern if you take in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, even today.

You find them performing other occupations like skinning carcasses and they're also ostracized from the mainstream society. This issue of caste, its effective disparities along with masculinities has also entered the diverse and varied spectrum of Telugu cinema.

Cinematic portrayals in general parlance serve a dual purpose. They either act as a medium for proliferation and dissemination of cultural thoughts and values or they question and deconstruct discriminatory practices and ideologies. We will be talking about this in very much detail when we talk about the construct of masculinity over the decades in Telugu cinema. But for now, Telugu cinema is the second largest film industry in India coming right after Hindi cinema or Bollywood.

It is also one of the major regional language film industries along with other regional language industries like Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, Marathi etcetera. Telugu cinema has also carved a distinctive ethos within the trajectory of Indian cinema by developing a diverse range of genres starting from mythological narratives, folk narratives, also hyper masculine action dramas. If I say there is one thing that's unchanged in the entire cinematic history of Telugu cinema, it is this hyper masculine action dramas, which I call it as a hallmark of Telugu cinema in itself.

Telugu film industry also established itself as a leading influence during the modernist film era, shaping everything right from unique costume and set designs, also innovations in editing, song composition, sound design and whatnot. According to Ormax Media Report, for the year 2024, Telugu films generated a total revenue of around 280 million U.S. dollars, contributing to 20% of the overall box office earnings in India.

It has also emerged as a formidable industry in the early 1920s with studios established in the then Madras Presidency, which is part of the Tamil Nadu state. Telugu cinema produced its first sound film Bhakta Prahalada in the year 1932. Just like any other film industry, Telugu cinema started off with mythological or devotional themes and later expanding to include social political realities in their cinematic narratives. And within this vast cinematic space, masculinity remains an uninhibited expression, around which a protagonist is being influenced to align with dominant cultural expression.

Telugu cinema has also introduced nuanced improvisations in the construction of masculinities, reflecting changing gender sensibilities and also anxieties around troubled manhood. To understand the construction of masculinities in India, sorry, in Telugu cinema we definitely have to talk about the interconnected frameworks of caste, cinema and politics which influence each other and also influenced by each other.

We cannot do away with this aspect when you are talking about Telugu cinema, because most of the film stars or actors in Telugu cinema, especially male actors go on to establish their political parties. If you take the current Deputy Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Pawan Kalyan who has got his own party, that is Janasena Party. He is a very much established actor in Telugu cinema.

And to understand the construct of masculinities in itself, they have to always go side by side or hand in hand with the genres in Telugu cinema, because genres again operate within the entranced caste structures prevalent in the Telugu states. As Richi argues, since the inception of Telugu cinema as an industry, Brahmins enjoyed a monopoly. Here I have attempted to trace masculinity over the decades.

One of the clearest manifestations of upper caste influence again is seen in this mythological genre. For instance, in films like Rama Paduka Pattabhishekam, or in films like Lava Kusa you find upper caste protagonist being seen as embodiment of idealized Indian masculine figure.

Later on, in the 1960s with the entry of Reddys, Kammas and Kapus, these are the sub castes.

But why did they enter Telugu all of a sudden? Because they are just agricultural castes. Thanks to green revolution that has happened in the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. From the humongous agricultural profits and the agricultural surplus, these sub castes have started investing in the film industry as actors, directors and producers. I again repeat, these are not upper castes in Telugu cinema but these are dominant castes. We find a slight thematic variation even within the mythological genre.

For instance, NT Ramarao's Daana Veera Soora Karna, this particular film translates to generous, heroic and valiant Karna. The traditionally vilified characters like Duryodhana and Karna are being brought about in a most positive manner, with dignity, with heroism, and also with all of their complexities. And later on in the 1980s, with the musical dramas coming in, especially in the films of K. Vishwanath, where classical dance and music are taken as tools of culturally refined superior masculinities. We see that in K. Vishwanath's films, Shankarabharanam and Sagara Sangamam, with the upper caste actors being agents of cultural revival.

We do have lower caste figures in these films, but they're often Sanskritized to legitimate their masculinity. Also 1980s saw the rise of the mass film genre which is very much important when we talk about masculinities because it is for the very first time in Telugu cinema, there is a dilution of not upper caste but upper-class masculinities.

Especially in films like Khaidi, Gang Leader. In the 1970s, Hindi cinema had a trope wherein anger was seen as a marker of heroic masculinity, especially in films enacted by Amitabh Bachchan. And that same trope has been carried to Telugu cinema in the 1980s, in films of the actor Chiranjeevi. He's seen as the face of the angry young man in Telugu cinema. But what is the cinematic formula of this mass film genre? We have this action-oriented spectacle, the themes of anger, vengeance and also, a male protagonist taking on an underdog role.

When Chiranjeevi is doing a rowdy figure in his films, he tries to dilute the upper-class masculinities.

However, in the 1990s, especially in the mid-1990s, this mass film genre, there is a crisis. And this crisis, many of the critics say it's because in the early 1990s, Telugu cinema started to shift its base from the then Madras Presidency to the now Hyderabad-based film industry, with directors like Gudavalli Ramabrahmam talking about how there is a need for Telugu cinema to talk about its own Telugu ness. We need to have a thematic reorientation. Chiranjeevi and his contemporaries like Balakrishna, Venkatesh and Nagarjuna start to dilute this rowdy figure or the lower-class masculinity figure.

But Balakrishna, if we talk about, he again goes back to the same old formula of upper caste masculine figure being taken the savior archetype. So here I am just playing a 30-second

video clip. I want you to just notice his performance style. This performance style characterized by slapping his thighs, twirling his moustache is considered synonymous to his machismo, especially portraying an upper caste alpha male figure.

When we talk about other actors like Venkatesh and Nagarjuna, they went to a more domesticated forms of masculinity, bringing in talking about family, honour, chastity, so on and so forth. And in the next phase, these varied and overlapping constructions of masculinity in Telugu cinema shaped the screen of third generation actors like NTR Junior accommodating physical aggression with melodramatic density.

I'm not going into depth in this particular phase since my focus is on post-2018, which we can term it as Dalit phenomena. Because from the year 2018 to 2021, there was a flurry of films, Telugu films, which talked about these Dalit issues by putting them at the centre. They are trying to reconstruct upper caste masculine ideologies.

For instance, in films like Love Story and Narappa, and also in other films like Sridevi Soda Centre and Uppena. The select cinematic texts like Rangasthalam and Uppena fall into this category.

But why do we need other multidimensional reading of the Dalit masculinities? What's the problem with univocal products of masculinity? Most traditional readings of masculinity, especially in relation to upper caste men, assume a unified, dominant and hegemonic structure. This view flattens out the differences and also ignores the hierarchy of caste.

In both cinema and sociological discourse, these masculinities are portrayed as expressions of power over other men irrespective of caste, patriarchal authority over women and also control over public, institutional and cultural spaces. They're mostly unmarked masculinities where caste or power privilege is just assumed but never named.

When we shift the lens to Dalit masculinity, the picture becomes complex because they are often excluded from upper caste institutions and representations targeted by caste violence and social humiliation. And yet in certain settings, Dalit men do reassert power, especially in the communal spaces like their family or even subcultural spaces.

Let me give a brief theoretical backing to it. RW Connell is considered the foundational figure for masculinity studies. And her model of hegemonic masculinity lays the groundwork by recognizing that masculinities are hierarchical and relational. There is this urban elite masculinity at the top and other masculinities just subordinated, either subordinated masculinities or marginalized masculinities.

This model of vertical hierarchy mostly focuses on who dominates whom. While it definitely introduces the idea of marginalized masculinity, caste cannot be centrally theorized. But applying Connell's model helps us to see how upper caste urban elite masculinity operates as hegemonic, recognize how Dalit masculinities are subordinated. When we shift to

Messerschmidt, we are moving from hierarchical model to a more multidimensional model. And multidimensionality was first theorized in a legal discourse in Athena D. Mutua's article 'Multidimensionality is to Masculinities what Intersectionality is to Feminism'. The focus is now not on who dominates whom, but rather to see how context, intersectionality and power relations shape these masculinities.

Using the multidimensional or employing a multidimensional reading helps us to recentre caste in masculinity studies. Like appropriating this multidimensional model helps us to recentre caste. We no longer see caste as a secondary or an underlying factor. It helps us to rethink, but caste becomes a central unifying force.

It helps us to rethink masculinity, not just as a male power. It's not just about dominance, but masculinity is also a site of negotiation. It's also a site of struggle. And this approach also de-essentializes Dalit men, they are no longer seen as a single frozen identity. Rather, we have them with agency, and with their flaws. We read them with all of their complexities.

These are the select cinematic texts. I tried to appropriate this multi-dimensional model into this text to see how the Dalit men's role is being shaped.

The select systematic texts Rangasthalam and Palasa 1978. Just to give you a brief introduction to this cinematic text: In revenge and deviance, N. Sukumar's Rangasthalam offers a narrative highly motivated by caste dynamics. It's set in a fictional village in 1980s Andhra Pradesh. It centres on Chitti Babu, played by Ram Charan, a partially hearing-impaired back from Dalit background.

While the film avoids direct naming of caste, it stages a deeply caste coded rural world wherein entire land ownership; you talk about political power, you talk about social control, everything is monopolized under the upper caste Phanindra Bhupati. So much that throughout the film you, as an audience, you don't even know what's his actual character name is. He's being always referred to as President.

Within this intricate social landscape the pervasive caste system exercises its authority by rigidly enforcing hierarchical boundaries, so that Dalits remain in their own space. Rangasthalam was also a decent box office success.

In short contrast, Palasa 1978 is an unapologetically political film that directly confronts caste oppression in Andhra's coastal district of Srikakulam. The film traces the journey of two brothers who are Dalits. Mohan Rao and Ranga Rao belong to a family who earn a living by singing and dancing to the folk songs which are very much native to Srikakulam.

The opening song talks about Palasa the place not just as a place, but as a person with its own quirks and personality. The narrative begins in 1938, as the very much title says and through 2018 and shows the evolution and aging of characters too, along with how they confront caste-based oppression. Unlike mainstream Telugu cinema, Palasa refuses to euphemize caste. It names, locates and indicts it.



Contextualizing Dalit masculinity in select cinematic texts: In Rangasthalam, Chitti Babu's Masculinity is being forged through marginality. His deafness, physical labour and emotional transparency mark him as vulnerable, sometimes even feminized in relation to upper caste masculinity.

Chitti Babu is always found to be in a dilemma. On one hand, he's trying to contend with a disability identity which marks him as weak and dependent. On the other hand, there is this upper caste hegemonic construction of masculinity as strong and independent.

Palasa 1978, on the other hand, provides a searing portrait of Dalit male subject being shaped by caste humiliation, rage, and the desire for justice. It critiques the wait for reform model of anti-caste politics, which most of people mistake and instead dramatizes the need for direct action. Sometimes it's even the bloodshed violence.

Trying to explore mobile or fluid masculinities within the Dalit discourse. As I've already mentioned, Dalit masculinities capable of manifesting various forms such as hegemonic or peripheral masculinity depending on the specific context. In relation to the upper caste male, Dalit men are sidelined culturally, socially and economically taking all the marginalized forms.

Both the films highlight upper caste masculinity by introducing powerful antagonist. If you talk about Rangasthalam, let me tell you how the antagonist Phanindra Bhupathi played by Jagapati Babu is introduced. There is this wide-angle lens and Jagapati Babu taking a dip in the holy river during the early mornings. And we also have the thread, the Brahmin thread that Brahmins wear showing that he belongs to the upper caste, by taking holy dip. What is foregrounded is a dead body being seen as floated on the river.

And post this particular shot, Chitti Babu introduces upper caste antagonist for about two long minutes, going on to say how his dominance and control acts in the village Rangasthalam.

As Connell and Messerschmidt note, masculinities are shaped through practices that are accomplished in social action and these public spaces become very much important as they become the construction sites of marginalized manhood, where even the most hegemonic of male subjects from the Dalit community can take on certain aspects of subordinated masculinities.

When we try to read caste negotiation in Rangasthalam, we can understand it through MSS Pandian's transcoding caste, an act that simultaneously acknowledges and disavows distinctions.

Caste is being acknowledged in a structural format. But on the other hand, the everyday material reality is being disavowed. To look at this aspect of transcoding caste, frames become very much important. As Gamson et al. propose, frames as fundamental structures or organizing principles that harmoniously unite and provide coherence to a wide range of

symbols and elements of ideas. When we are looking at frames, I want you to focus on how the body language works or how is camera as a tool is utilized.

For instance, a scene where Kumar Babu rushes to the village president Phanindra Bhupati's house to plead for his brother's release from police custody. Even before the dialogue sets in between Phanindra Bhupathi and Kumar Babu, the upper caste gaze of Phanindra Bhupati bring directed onto the Kumar Babu's footwear, which Dalits otherwise are not supposed to wear, even in front of upper castes. The high camera angle in this particular scene further adds to the symbolic meaning making. This particular frame is being balanced with the next frame where a worker hands over a pair of chappals to Phanindra Bhupati, with Kumar Babu's feet looming in the background.

In situations like these, Dalit male contending with cultural, social and economic marginalization vis-à-vis the upper caste male assumes a posture emblematic of marginalized or oppressed masculinity. As the upper caste president enters the village, just in two shots, we can understand the entire masculine dynamics of marginality and superiority.

Where you find Dalit men's chest being deflated like a balloon and would shuffle around so as to not offend. In the first frame you find Dalit men, as soon as they spot this upper-caste figure coming, the towels that are there around the neck, they take them with their hands. And with their bended backs, they bow. If they are wearing a chappal they will just remove them. The dhoti or veshti they are tying, they will lower it down.

You can spot Chitty Babu in the second frame, trying to align with the same model of subservience. These stereotypical postures of subservience are rather inscribed upon individual bodies through the process of socialization or even they are very much naturalized.

One aspect in most of these films is metaphor of thoughts, which you can even find in the next film that we talk about that is Palasa because it basically functions as a symbolic act of dehumanization. In a particular scene that I just wanted to talk about is when a group of Dalit men or Dalit community for that matter, when they enter upper-caste Phanindra Bhupati's house to complain about the fraudulent activities of the society.

The very first remark that upper caste men throw at these Dalit men is a Telugu proverb, which goes like 'oorlo pelli kukkala hadavidi' which means for a wedding in a village, it's the dogs that make the most noise.

This remark does not just act as a caste insult, but it is also a masculine insult, stripping Dalits of their identity and individuality.

So in the film Palasa, Dalit masculinity is being stripped by disobeying their culture. As I've already mentioned, Ranga Rao earns his living by singing and dancing to the folk narratives. In one particular competition that he participates, we also have other upperclassmen

participating. But the upper caste authoritative figure who is actually enjoying Ranga Rao's song, interrupts, asking the other person who is giving marks to Ranga Rao. He says 'Master, are you keeping marks?' He continues, 'First, second and third should only go to upper class children.'

This is again followed by a dialogue, 'We need the song only for ceremonies around death-reducing Dalit culture to a tool, and a mere convenience. They are no more treated as valued participants in the social cultural framework of this village Srikakulam.'

Ranga Rao, a Dalit man whose hard work was instrumental in getting an upper-caste leader elected as an MLA, is again depicted from a high angle. In the frame towards the left, when Ranga Rao is trying to ask upper caste figure or upper caste leader, 'I have done enough for this party, I should get a post in the party's cadre', it's not just dialogue hitting harsh but even the frame is marginalized. Or, in the frame towards the left, upper caste leader is sitting in the centre with his legs crossed and the other upper caste men take their seats in the rows that are there towards the right of the frame.

Meanwhile the upper caste figures are shot from a low angle which visually elevates, asserts their dominance. This angle politics exists in most of the narratives. You talk about any issue on caste, I bet you'll definitely file this angle dynamics and the imagery continues to reinforce this hierarchy. In a scene, Ranga Rao is shown eating while sitting on the ground, a visual metaphor of subordinate position. Quickly, shortly afterward, the camera shifts from a Dalit man to a dog, actually drawing a comparison that dehumanizes him. This continues to be there till the end of the film where an upper caste figure says, 'did you ever see Dalit men winning any case? winning? They are just dogs without belts.' That is his comment.

However, in the interactions with Dalit women and other Dalit men who are outside the power dynamics that empowered Dalit male is a complicit Dalit male.

In Indian Dalit narratives, the prominence of paternal or spousal male figures as representatives of patriarchy has endured for centuries. In addition to that, fatherhood functions as both a 'confirmation' of masculinity and a platform for the reinforcement of patriarchal control. Like you see in Rama Lakshmi, who is the female lead in the film Rangasthalam. She acts according to the whims and fancies of two men. One is her father and the other one is the Dalit protagonist Chitti babu.

When the Dalit protagonist Chitti Babu tries to secretly meet her at night. Her father encounters both of them and asks Ram Lakshmi in an authoritative tone, 'do you really love him?' She does not even raise her head and you her just lowering her head down, not even uttering a word. And this pattern of control continues to run in loop in this particular film. Where in one particular scene, as I've already mentioned, when entire community goes to upper caste men's house to question societies fraudulent activities because Rama Lakshmi's father has taken a loan of ₹10,000 but the society has written it as ₹20,000 trying to loot as much as money as they can.

Ram Lakshmi first pointed it out. When she points that out, she does not directly go to the president and ask, she instead goes to Chitti Babu. And later on in this particular scene, when upper caste men ask Rama Lakshmi's father how much money did you take. He quickly, in a posture of bended back says, Sir, I have taken a loan of 20,000 rupees. Rama Lakshmi quickly looks and asks why did you even lie?

He does not even give a reply, leave about giving a response. He drags her from that place in front of all the other Dalit men and women and the upper caste men, bursting the entire scene with laughter.

Rangamatha is a Dalit woman in the film Rangasthalam, who stands out as courageous and spirited, earning a living by renting a water motor to Chitti Babu. However, her character is soon overshadowed as she primarily serves as Chitti Babu's aunt and translator, which is evident in her name ending with atha, meaning aunt in Telugu.

And her identity is also largely defined by her enduring attachment to her husband. Once Chitti Babu when he comes to know that Rangamatha's husband is actually dead, he asks Rangamatha, why do you have to hide that your husband is dead? What makes you hide about your husband's death? She says, if I don't say that my husband is dead, every man in the village or even men around me trying to take advantage, will definitely take advantage over me. This masculine code of honour which plays a very vital role in upper caste home or familial dynamics has entered into Dalit frame as well. And Dalit men follow the same mechanism of control that upper caste men used to dominate them. As Still mentions, it may seem surprising that ideas of prestige, honour and respect occupy centre stage in Dalits, as they are normally associated with the affluent upper castes.

In the film Palasa, we don't have the father figure, but the brother figure who takes on the role of the Dalits patriarchy. The female Lakshmi is pressured to conform to patriarchal required behavior. This controlling brother image attempts to assert authority over Lakshmi's choice of clothing criticizing her cosmetic makeover. When she just gets ready, applying koyal in her eyes and braiding her hair, he shouts, don't need to get ready like this, I'll break your legs. Dalit men thus enforce an uninterrupted constant coercion on women.

In this film after she gets married to the protagonist Ranga Rao, she asks, why do you have to go after violence? Let's get back to our work. Let's go sing and dance to the folk songs. But Ranga Rao just denies saying no. I will feed my family in my own manner. This brings in the economic hold that Dalit men try to put over their own families.

Coston and Kimmel argue that marginalization frames power from a unique vantage point presenting a critical choice: either they over conform to dominant possibilities, or you find a masculinity of resistance. If you look at both the films, Rangasthalam and Palasa 1978, they definitely fit into the first box, that is, over confirming to dominant masculinities which is, again, very much problematic.

Why? I will tell you on two levels. Firstly, the select cinematic narratives still imitate Dalit masculinity in the manner of upper caste masculine ideals, mostly through violence. The absence of narratives from their lived experience in Lefebvre's term, negates the consolidation of the Dalit counter public sphere which is very much needed for Telugu cinema and industry, which has been dominated by upper castes. And that the select films fit naturally into a sexist and misogynist mould, forcing viewers to reckon with awfully regressive gender politics on screen.

And on that note, I draw three conclusive remarks. While the recent surge in global attention to Telugu cinema has definitely underscored its potential, I am trying to contribute by reassessing the masculinist discourse in relation to past agenda within two cinematic texts. Given the prolonged journey towards developing alter-imaginaries through Dalit cinema, Telugu cinema has yet to authentically represent Dalit masculinities like how other regional centres are doing. Like if you take in Marathi cinema, there is Nagaraj Manjule's *Fantry* and *Sairat*. If you take in Tamil cinema, you have Pa Ranjith's *Kaala* and *Kabali* trying to rescript Dalit masculinity in their own terms.

But Telugu cinema is still framing it often through the lens of upper-caste masculine norms, particularly in the narratives of vengeance. Let me tell you how these two narratives end. *Rangasthalam* starts with Chitti Babu trying to save an upper caste man, and when he goes into a short period of coma, he nurtures him, he cares for him, he makes sure he comes back to life. And when he does, towards the end, Rama Lakshmi is left at downstairs, and Chitti babu takes a bag. He has a sickle in that bag, goes and just kills the upper-caste man.

In *Palasa* 1978, interestingly, for a brief period of 10 min, the protagonist Mohan Rao goes to pursue education, thinking that education is a real hope for Dalit men like him. But again, towards the end, he comes back to village, takes a knife and beheads the upper-caste antagonist in the midst of a festive environment. There is a jathara that's happening in the village, and this is how it ends.

The study emphasizes the need for Telugu cinema to go beyond such hypermasculinity assertion and toward more reflective and motivated representations of power, identity, and gendered positionality. These are my select references that I've used for this presentation. And thank you for your time and patience.

[End of Transcript]