This is a promotional booklet containing random selection of some chapters of the book ‘NTR-A Biography’ which will be available in all the book stores in January 2019. The book is a hard bound edition of 662 pages including two sections of photographs some of which are rare and hitherto unseen in 14 pages.

This booklet is not for sale

CLS Publishers
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NTR strove not to get trapped in an image. Bhukailas released in 1958 opened a new window to test his range as an actor. The success of the movie excited him and he wanted to explore more of that genre. His own production house had made movies with social, folklore, and devotional themes until now. The time was ripe for a film based on mythology. NTR had some traits of Ravana in his personality, except that he was the opposite of evil and cruelty, the dominant characteristics of Ravana. In Bhukailas, Ravana was confined to a small arena. The idea of Ravana in his full glory caught NTR’s fancy. It is hard not to read NTR’s timing of Sitaramakalyanam, his next home production, as the ultimate expression of his fascination for Ravana’s multifaceted personality.

Even while the idea of Ravana was just an idea and a story that as yet had no outline, NTR asked his favourite director K.V. Reddy to direct the film and he agreed not knowing that NTR wanted to play the role of Ravana. While the script work was in progress, NTR enlisted the help of his friend and classmate at school, D.B.V. Chowdary, to make a comprehensive study of the character of Ravana. Ravana was taking shape with his inputs and when the script was nearly ready, Chowdary came across a book titled Sita paribhramana vibhavam in which Ravana’s character was delineated culling out material from many sources besides the Siva Purana and the Ramayana. He was impressed with the profile of Ravana that was etched in the book and commended it to NTR for adaptation. NTR too found it acceptable and wrote the script as the story of Ravana from inside.

When K.V. Reddy realised that NTR wanted to be cast as Ravana and not Rama, he backed out. He said he had made NTR the reigning deity of the public by making him play the role of Krishna in Mayabazar and now
his conscience did not permit him to see NTR in the role of Ravana. The public too would not like it, he prophesied, and advised NTR to drop the idea. He also seemed to say that the attempt to aestheticise the character of Ravana, to redeem the irredeemable, was hopelessly futile. But NTR stood his ground and told Reddy that he appreciated his sentiment but he would nevertheless make the movie. His brother Trivikrama Rao too was aghast at the thought that NTR wished to play the role of Ravana. It took NTR a lot of explaining to convince his brother about the soundness and commercial viability of the project.

With K.V. Reddy refusing to direct the movie, NTR decided to test his mettle himself as a director. He had honed the craft by keenly observing the masters such as K.V. Reddy, B.N. Reddy and L.V. Prasad. In an interview, he recalled that in his early years in the films, he used to ask what the story was and B.N. Reddy would laugh at the question and ask him to read the script rather than ask for the story. Asking what the shot was also chaffed at. The script was everything. K.V. Reddy also never told the story, NTR said. Nor would he tell shot division or the scenic order. Instead, he would hand over the script to read and understand. The
script book would contain every detail of the characters, story, dialogues, costumes and sets and all. An actor would benefit greatly from reading the script. He would know about the nature of the role in full measure and aid him in capturing the soul of the character. Once completed, K.V. Reddy never deviated from the script. Singeetham Srinivasa Rao, who had worked as an assistant to K.V. Reddy, said, ‘With K.V. Reddy’s script, which was so detailed and so complete, anyone could direct a film. It would be a child’s play.’ Alfred Hitchcock said screenplay was everything. Thereafter what remained was the mechanical transfer on to the film. NTR’s methods resonated this belief.

‘Their methods guide me,’ NTR said referring to K.V. Reddy, B.N. Reddy and L.V. Prasad. ‘I would not narrate the story to my actors in my films. I would hand over the script and ask them to study it before coming on the set. Once on the set, I would not tolerate anyone focusing on anything else. Even the most important matters had to be taken care of outside the set. On the set, all thoughts must be focused on acting and the characterisation of the role.’

NTR prepared the script complete in all respects in the style of K.V. Reddy. Once it was complete, it was a habit with NTR to write the script entirely in his own hand. He believed that writing the script in his own hand allowed him to gain command over the scenes, characters and dialogues. From the first to the last dialogue, from the first shot to the last, he would have it all noted in the book. It was like a detailed book of director’s diary. He would decide the cast, determine how a dialogue had to be said and how to picturise a shot well before the shooting commenced. Even before the first shot was canned, the entire movie would be clearly etched in his mind. ‘It is said that the director is the first audience of the movie. If a director fails to have a full vision of the movie, he is no good as a director.’ This was his belief too.

Trivikrama Rao wanted NTR to play the role of Rama also in Sitaramakalyanam but NTR wanted a much younger man than him to play the role of Rama and thus Haranath was chosen.

Once the script was ready, NTR attended to pre-production work
meticulously. He had the sets designed by his art director T.V.S. Sarma. He sat with the designers and had the costumes and jewellery designed. He was good at illustrations. So, often he would draw the designs himself and guide the designers. The crowns had to be just perfect for every character.

M.A. Rehman was signed as the cinematographer for the film. Rehman was a race addict and he played truant. He was not found on the set while NTR arrived with make-up and this happened more than once. NTR decided to replace him. He remembered Ravikanth Nagaich, Babubhai Mistry’s assistant, who was looking for work in south Indian films. He signed him and that turned out to be a masterstroke. Nagaich grabbed the opportunity with both hands. He found a fertile subject to exhibit his workmanship, especially his expertise in trick photography. A fine example of his craft is the scene where the ten-headed Ravana lifts Mount Kailas. A lesser cameraman would have used nine dummy heads and one real head of NTR and no one would have found fault with him for doing that. But Nagaich reached for the stars. He took mask shots with varying facial expressions of NTR with each of the ten original heads chanting ‘Om namassivaya’ while lifting the mountain. Laborious and backbreaking for the actor and the cameraman. The way the sequence is constructed is a brilliant piece of screenwriting. Nagaich’s breathtaking trick shots combined with slick editing made the scene memorable. The movie is a visual treat because of first rate camera work and art designing.

S. Rajeswara Rao who was signed as the music director composed the song *Kanaraara kailasa nivasa* … followed by the high voltage verse *Jayatwada bravibhrama*… While Rajeswara Rao sat composing music for a song, NTR hummed a tune and asked him to use it for a song. ‘*Mee nota vachchina swaraalu naa harmoniumlo palakavu saar,*’ (The vocal tune you
have hummed cannot be produced on my harmonium, sir), S. Rajeswara Rao haughtily replied, rose and walked out. Galipenchala Narasimha Rao stepped in as the music composer and he came out with outstanding compositions including the evergreen song *Seetharamula kalyanam choothamu raarandi*, an absolute must even today in almost every Telugu Hindu marriage and during the Srirama Navami celebrations.

Frustrated that Siva had not been pleased with his penance, Ravana decides to sacrifice his life. He tears open his stomach with his bare hands, pulls out his entrails, and plays *rudraveena* with his guts as the strings. It is a lengthy scene and NTR’s acting while stringing the guts received great accolades. Eemani Sankara Sastry’s veena recital for the scene lends weight to the poignancy of the moment and is one of the highlights of the movie.

NTR was a creature of discipline and was quite unlike many stars such as Hollywood’s Charlie Chaplin who in the name of artistic temperament disliked rigour and discipline. For Charlie Chaplin, his studio was not a typical movie factory. NTR was an absolute contrast to Chaplin. He woke up early and punctually arrived on the set with the make-up on. While acting in mythological movies, he would not eat anything on the set so long as he wore the make-up and the costumes.

On the set of his films, work went on with precision from 7 a.m. Pack up was announced at 6 p.m. He avoided shooting at night unless there was a special reason or emergency. He wanted his artists to look fresh. If they looked tired or fatigued, he would not shoot with them. He followed the example of B.N. Reddy and K.V. Reddy who expected their artists to be fresh on the set. K.V. Reddy would say that the face of an actor must always look fresh as a flower. Then the expressions would be perfect. Especially before shooting the close up shots, he would carefully watch the face of the artist and only if it looked fresh would he go ahead and shoot.

As a film maker, NTR detested unnecessary expenditure. He would happily spend money on rich sets, good costumes and jewellery because all these would show on the screen and add value to the movie. But he
was extremely chary of expenses behind the scenes. His credo was that every luxury was acceptable when the lights on the set were turned on. Lights turned off, no expense would enter the production account. NTR was very strict about this.

NTR adored cinema and everyone involved in it. But he did not know how to smile on the set. When NTR shot a film for his home banner, the atmosphere in the set would be controlled. No gossip. No sound other than what the shot demanded. He did not have to shout. Everyone submitted to him willingly. For those working with him, it was a lot like being in an Indian school. As a director of his films, in the initial days, he was emotional on the set and would lose his cool even at a minor mistake and yell. But gradually, he learned to control his emotions. He developed inner peace. He said his experience taught him to work on the set error-free. If a mistake still occurred, he would correct it with equanimity. He had his third eye open all the time, shooting with the whole picture in mind. When he worked only two schedules a day, which he did after a few hectic years of three schedules a day, he would be back at home at 6 in the evening, plan for the next day’s shoot, give instructions of the requirements for the shooting next day including the costumes of the artists and retire to bed at 9 at night. ‘Work would get done smoothly as scheduled precisely. Not a minute would be wasted. My life is like a clock, precise and ticking nonstop,’ he said.

He was a good pay master and being aware of the troubles faced by the junior artists, he would take special care of them. Junior artists went to his film’s shooting with the confidence that while returning they would have money to keep the hearth burning in the kitchen. He never deferred payments to the actors or the technicians. When he made films in Hyderabad, junior artists came from Madras and returned to Madras by the night train. By the evening, the voucher and cheque would be in their hands. He did not pay cash because he did not want the managers to fleece them.

Before the release of *Sitaramakalyanam*, NTR arranged a special screening for K.V. Reddy. NTR must have had goose bumps since Reddy
was known to be free and frank with his comments. Besides, this was a film K.V. Reddy had refused to direct for good and valid reasons and had gone to the extent of advising NTR also not to make it. After the preview, K.V. Reddy just uttered two words: ‘Very good’. While shooting, if he was happy with the shot, he would say ‘pass’. So, the comment ‘very good’ from him meant something very special, close to ‘distinction’. NTR was elated by the response.

Released on 6 January 1961, the movie was a box office super hit celebrating 100 days’ run in nine centers. The critics singled out NTR’s directorial efforts for special praise. The reviewers were lavish in their admiration of NTR’s versatility. The audience admired NTR’s interpretation of Ravana and his standout performance. NTR’s Ravana was a conjuring act. Despite his roaring and despicable tyranny, he looked vulnerable and, surprisingly, adorable. The movie manifested the irrepresible courage of NTR as an actor and a moviemaker.

In Andhra Patrika weekly issue of 18 January 1961, NTR came out with a signed article on his favourite character in movies and not surprisingly his choice was Ravana. NTR gave good reasons for his selection. ‘Ravana was a demon by birth but he was highly accomplished—a scholar, a musician and a worshipper of Lord Siva. He was valorous, so valorous that Lord Vishnu himself had to take birth as a human being to destroy him. All his valour and virtues were undone by his arrogance, aggression, wantonness and ego,’ he said. On another occasion, he said, ‘The popular impression is that Ravana looked awful. But I thought a person like Ravana need not look terrible. So, I wanted to
experiment and played the role.’

NTR received praise for his portrayal of Ravana from some unexpected quarters also. ‘I felt blessed when I received a letter from the head of the Sringeri Peetham. Many other heads of Saiva peethams also wrote to me praising me for my acting,’ said NTR.

Though NTR directed Sitaramakalyanam, he did not take credit for it. The title card of the director was missing. The reason for this is shrouded in mystery. The mystery continued with his next movie too, this time a folklore based on Kasimajili Kathalu, the Indian version of an episode of The Arabian Nights. This movie Gulebakavali Katha paired Jamuna opposite NTR. Jamuna was not cast in the films of NTR and ANR for more than two years due to a rift and ego hassles and once the embargo was lifted, NTR was the first to cast her in his film. Swords weighing nearly 8 kilos were specially made for the fights between the hero and the villain in the film.

NTR invited Dr. C. Narayana Reddy (‘Cinare’) to write the lyrics for the movie. Cinare accepted on the condition that he must be allowed to write all the songs and not just one or two in the film. This condition was accepted and he and NTR forged a lasting relationship with each other. When Cinare came to Madras for the first time to work in the film, NTR went to the railway station to receive him just to show his respect for the poet. The movie
also introduced Joseph and Krishnamurthy duo as the music directors. The songs in the movie were refreshingly different and the film was a musical hit. The song *Nannu dochukunduvate vannela dorasani*, which was Cinare’s debut lyric, picturised on NTR and Jamuna, is an evergreen audio and video romantic hit.

Jamuna’s sprightly performance, NTR’s alluring presence, mood elevating songs, novel fights and all round technical excellence contributed to the success of the film. *Gulebakavali Katha* released on 5 January 1962, exactly one year after his debut directorial movie *Sitaramakalyanam*, was a commercial hit celebrating 100 days in five centres. Like with his debut film as director, in his second film too, no one was credited with direction in the title card.

Ravana in *Sitaramakalyanam* was a cinematic triumph for NTR as an actor, producer and director. By 1965, he had acted as Srikrishna in five films starting with *Mayabazar* in 1957 and had played the roles of Bheeshma, Bheema and Arjuna from the epic *Mahabharatha*. Having tasted success with the portrayal of Ravana, the idea of playing the role of Suyodhana in the *Mahabharatha* with all his glory and foibles,
a much maligned character, excited NTR. The result was the movie *Srikrishnapandaveeyam*. The story for the film was taken from many sources, creating almost equal parts for Srikrishna, Bheema and Suyodhana. This was NTR’s third film as director but he had not taken credit for direction in his first two movies but in the third movie, his name appears right on the first of the title cards for screenplay and direction. P. Pullaiah, who was the president of the South India Film Directors’ Association then, met him and told him that omission to acknowledge a person as the director amounted to insulting the director’s chair. Appreciating the logic, NTR yielded and took the credit.

NTR valued time. On his sets, he insisted on punctuality. If there was prior notice of delay, he would accommodate. Not otherwise. For *Srikrishnapandaveeyam*, K.R.Vijaya was signed for the role of Rukmini. It was her debut film in Telugu. She turned up late on the set continuously for three days. On the fourth day, NTR sent her a legal notice and asked her to compensate for the loss of shooting time. A compromise was struck and she continued. Never did she report late on the set afterwards.

For Suyodhana, NTR wore a heavy crown continuously and that left a permanent mark on his forehead.

*Srikrishnapandaveeyam* is a visual extravaganza with top performances of NTR in dual roles of Srikrishna and Suyodhana and Udayakumar as Bheema. K.R. Vijaya in her role as Rukmini, who falls in love with Krishna and sends Him a message to marry her by taking her away forcibly, won the hearts of the Telugu viewers. V.A.K. Ranga Rao, a well-known film critic, after watching a preview of the film told NTR: ‘The film is good. But I thought you were not the director of Rukmini Kalyanam episode.’ NTR was taken aback and was tense. ‘I felt it was Pothana who directed the episode,’ Ranga Rao said. NTR broke into a hearty smile. That was high praise, coming from a hard-to-please critic like V.A.K. Ranga Rao. Rukmini Kalyanam is a part of the Bhagavatham translated into Telugu by the eminent poet Pothana. His compliment meant that the episode, a poem on celluloid, was authentic and would have made the poet proud.

NTR’s portrayal of Suyodhana outclassed his own acting as Ravana
in *Sitaramakalyanam*. The Mayasabha scene is *tour de force* of the movie. The movie unarguably belonged to NTR, the director, and his stirring portrayal as Suyodhana.

The movie ran for 100 days in nine centres.

The next home production, *Varakatnam*, a movie attacking the social evil of dowry directed by NTR, ran for 100 days and won the national award for the best Telugu film.

Next January saw the release of *Thalla? Pellama?* It was directed by NTR. The story too was written by him. The film was successful running 100 days. L.V. Prasad, NTR’s mentor, had made many successful movies in Hindi. In 1972, he remade Vijaya Productions’ *Pelli chesi chudu*, a silver jubilee movie in Telugu which he himself had directed in 1952, into Hindi with the title *Shadi ke baad*. The movie flopped. The failure depressed L.V. Prasad. One day NTR visited L.V. Prasad at his home and casually suggested to Prasad that he could think of making a film in Hindi based on his film *Thalla? Pellama?*. L.V. Prasad accepted the advice and made the movie into Hindi as *Bidaai*. It was a hit. Ramesh Prasad, son of L.V. Prasad, said, ‘In Navrang theatre, one man in the audience kept hitting his head on the wall crying, “This is my story.” The audience connected so much to the theme and the response was amazing.’ NTR won the Filmfare award for best story for *Bidaai*.

24 December 1971 saw the release of *Srikrishna Satya*. In this, NTR played the roles of Srikrishna and Rama while Jayalalitha played the roles of Satyabhama and Chandrasena. Jayalalitha won the Filmfare award for the best actress in Telugu for her acting in this movie. The film won Nandi award for the best feature film.

Officially, K.V. Reddy is credited with directing the movie *Srikrishna Satya*. But K.V. Reddy was sick by 1970 with the complications of diabetes. His eyesight also had dimmed. Following the failure of *Harischandra* and *Uma Chandi Gowri Sankarula Katha* directed by K.V. Reddy for Vijaya Productions, Nagi Reddy and Chakrapani suddenly retired all the staff who had been working for Vijaya Productions for many years. Writer Pingali Nagendra Rao, art directors Gokhale and Kaladhar, and all their
assistants too were cashiered. This was done to spite K.V. Reddy. NTR went over to Reddy’s house and to uplift his mood, he requested K.V. Reddy to direct *Srikrishna Satya* or *Chanakya Chandragupta*, the scripts of which were complete. K.V. Reddy was touched by the gesture. ‘I will do *Srikrishna Satya* and retire happily with the satisfaction that at the end of my career, I have directed a successful film.’

According to one version which is part of the lore of the Telugu film industry, K.V. Reddy approached NTR for a loan to fund his son’s study in the USA. NTR gave him the money and when Reddy was talking of repaying the debt, NTR told him not to worry about it. But he knew K.V. Reddy was a proud man and he would not like the idea of being indebted to anyone. So, NTR requested him to direct a film for him and treat that amount as an advance of directorial remuneration. When the movie was being made, NTR made Reddy sit on the sets of *Srikrishna Satya* and directed the film all by himself. NTR paid the director’s remuneration of Rs.3 lakhs to K.V. Reddy. This is the version many in the industry swear by.

But K.V. Reddy’s son disagreed with this popular version in a public meeting on the occasion of the launch of K.V. Reddy’s biography. His version is that sometime in May 1970, his father went to meet NTR, who lived two streets away from theirs, casually and during the chitchat, he mentioned that his son who had completed graduation in the IIT wanted to go the USA whereas he was not inclined to send him. To this, NTR’s reaction was that no one had gone to the USA in their families and so he should be allowed to go. NTR persuaded K.V. Reddy to agree and slipped into his hand, cash of Rs.20,000 saying it was an advance for directing a movie for him. Reddy’s son said he was a witness to this and that the popular version was all ‘bullshit’. One or two persons from the film industry who spoke after him contradicted his version on the dais and said the popular version was authentic.

It is a matter of record that K.V. Reddy had lost money as a producer. The films that he had directed lately had not done well. Nagi Reddy and Chakrapani were ruthless and found him dispensable. His health was
nothing enviable, his sugar and blood pressure registering very high levels. His eye sight was horribly weak. Therefore, he was in no position to direct a movie. It was no secret that NTR had treated K.V. Reddy as his guru. He knew his guru was a proud man and would not accept charity, even if he had a pressing need. NTR perhaps wished to save K.V. Reddy of any embarrassment by his gesture and might have allowed K.V. Reddy to feel good by making him the official director of the film while doing all the work himself. It is possible that he would have taken a suggestion or two from K.V. Reddy during the shooting of the film. When K.V. Reddy visited the sets, he would have certainly been offered to take the director’s chair. Even his sworn enemy would not accuse NTR of lacking in good manners and grace.

Jayalalitha expected her guests to be treated well. Once B.K. Easwar, a journalist, wanted to interview her for a prestigious film magazine. She agreed to do the interview and asked him to meet her on the sets of *Srikrishna Satya* in the Vauhini Studio. It was well known in the film circles that neither NTR nor K.V. Reddy allowed journalists on their sets. Jayalalitha did not know this. Since she had given an appointment, Easwar turned up on the set but the production executive asked him to leave. Jayalalitha’s make-up assistant who saw this went inside and told Jayalalitha. She took this as a personal affront.

The shot was ready and Jayalalitha was sent a message to come on the set. She would not show up. NTR was restlessly waiting on the floor. He did not know the reason for her unseemly behaviour. The production executive understood. He knew what was happening and why. He
rushed to NTR and quietly told him why she was truant. NTR sized up the situation. The last thing he wished to have was a row on his set with a star like Jayalalitha and an interruption of the shooting. NTR capitulated. He looked around and found fault with the production assistant. ‘He is her guest. How dare you prevent him from meeting her? First, say “sorry” to Madam. Bring him in, offer him a seat and treat him with courtesy,’ NTR ordered. With this, Jayalalitha was mollified and normalcy was restored. This was perhaps a rare and solitary instance when NTR broke with the long-established tradition by opening the set to a press reporter.

An interesting aside of the film was that Jayalalitha acted as Satyabhama and NTR as Srikrishna in this movie while in his first film as Srikrishna in *Mayabazar*, Sandhya, Jayalalitha’s mother, had played the character of Rukmini, Srikrishna’s wife. Both the movies were directed by K.V. Reddy.

*Thathamma Kala* was a unique movie. NTR wrote its story. He was the producer, and director. He played two roles in it. His sons Harikrishna and Balakrishna played pivotal roles in the movie. For Balakrishna, who was 14 years of age, this was his debut movie. The film focused on the well-being of the farmers and was critical of family planning citing the cases of Srikrishna who was the eighth child and Gandhi the sixth child of their parents who would
not have been born if their parents practised small family norm. The film which released on 30 Aug 1974 did reasonably well at the box office but the movie's criticism of family planning came into sharp focus. 'I'm not opposed to the land reforms and family planning. My view is that if everyone in India worked hard, land reforms and family planning would not be necessary,' NTR explained. The issue figured in the debates held in the Assembly. The air was thick with the rumour that the film would be banned by the government. After the film completed 50 days' run, NTR announced through the press that he was voluntarily withdrawing the picture from the theatres. He reshoot some scenes which he thought were controversial and released the movie again on 8 January 1975. No other movie had this distinction of being released as a new movie after four months with the theme substantially altered. NTR won the State government's best story award for the film.

Then NTR made Daana Veera Sura Karna. This was the first film to be made after Ramakrishna Cine Studios was inaugurated on 7 June 1976. In the full page advertisement released on the occasion, NTR proudly announced that the studio was built with his own earnings from acting. NTR used the occasion to acknowledge his debt to L.V. Prasad, who had launched him in the films, by bestowing on him the honour of opening the studio. B. Nagi Reddy who made him a star with the films produced by Vijaya Productions switched on the camera and MGR, his friend and mentor, gave the first clap. No one failed to notice the difference between this and the opening ceremony of ANR's Annapurna
Studio on 14 January 1976 where the President of India Fakruddin Ali Ahmed was the chief guest.

S. Rajeswara Rao who was signed as music director composed the song Ye thalli ninu kannado... and for another song when NTR hummed some melodies for the maestro to develop on his harmonium, the composer stomped out. This was a case of history repeating itself, for the maestro had walked out of NTR's first directorial venture Sitaramakalyanam also after composing one song.

Kondaveeti Venkatakavi, a rationalist, wrote the dialogues for the movie, packing punches on caste and the accident of birth. The long winding dialogues in the movie delivered by NTR with exquisite modulation stayed with the audience long after the film was over. When Karna is sought to be disqualified from participating in the archery contest because of his low caste, Suyodhana launches into a lengthy discourse in the movie on caste, questioning and heckling at the lineage of Drona, the Kauravas and Pandavas, starting with the question, emantivi emantivi? (What, what did you say?) After the release of the movie, audio cassettes of that sermon sold millions of copies. It probably is the most watched and heard dialogue in the social media and on television even today even though the movie was made well over four decades ago!

While NTR was working on the screenwriting of the movie, the rumour that another star-actor Krishna was making a movie titled Kurukshethram made rounds of the industry and it reached NTR’s ear too. He was surprised since Krishna looked upon NTR with respect and
he refrained from doing anything that would upset NTR. NTR called Krishna and was talked down. Krishna said he was not the producer of the movie and that he had merely consented to play the role of Arjuna in the movie. He said he did not know that NTR was making a movie on the same theme and agreed that a second movie on the subject was not good for the industry. He went back and asked A.S.R. Anjaneyulu, the producer, to drop the project. The producer said he had already spent Rs.15 lakhs and if the project was scrapped, he would make a loss which he would not be able to sustain. Krishna was caught in a cleft stick. He got back to NTR and explained the situation. NTR was not amused. The producer approached ANR to act as Srikrishna but ANR did not agree after knowing that NTR was making a movie on the same theme. Sobhan Babu was signed for the role. NTR asked Sobhan Babu to meet him and told him not to act in the movie. Sobhan Babu replied that he had already taken advance from the producer. NTR did not prolong the discussion.

*Kurukshethram* was made with a large budget, with long shooting spells in Jaipur and Bangalore. When the shooting of the war scenes was in progress in Jaipur, the producer ran out of finances and Krishna had to step in as co-producer.

For NTR, it was a race against time. His movie was going to clash with *Kurukshethram* and he did not want his movie to hit the screens after *Kurukshethram* was released. It had to be before. NTR worked at a breakneck pace.

In *Daana Veera Sura Karna*, NTR was acting as Srikrishna and the negative character of Suyodhana and the role of Karna, a role which had both positive and negative traits. It was a mythological film with political overtones. For his roles in *Daana Veera Sura Karna*, he had to sit for make-up for up to three hours and two hours to remove the greasepaint. He wore a heavy crown of 3 kgs for the role of Suyodhana from early morning before he came on the set until packup at late night. The concussion left another indelible mark on his forehead. The shooting went on for forty-three days and during this period, in personal life, he was a combination of the characters he acted in the film. He was the
producer as also the director.

The atmosphere on the sets of *Daana Veera Sura Karna* was calm even though heavy shooting was in progress all the time. NTR was always organised and known for speed in making films. He approached his work in this film in particular with self-destructive mania, at one point shooting nonstop for seventy-two hours. He did not look at rushes every day. Only on the editing table did he see the film shot by him. With furious energy, he finished the movie in forty-three days. Those forty-three days were hectic and the only visible thing was the speed of acting and taking, taking multi-tasking to a new level. It is a wonder that such a huge film with one person donning multiple roles on and off screen was made in forty-three days. NTR alone could have pulled off such magnificent feat. He too could do it only because of his manic dedication to the craft and because as B.K. Easwar said, ‘NTR was the only person in world cinema who had absolute mastery over every department of film-making.’

The length of *Daana Veera Sura Karna* was 4 hours 17 minutes. Raj Kapoor’s *Mera Naam Joker* was longer. It was 4 hours 24 minutes but after the first week of screening, the length was cut down by 40 minutes. Thus, *Daana Veera Sura Karna* held the record for the longest film. In 1987, *Tamas* broke that record.

Raj Kapoor’s film with three heroines was a commercial failure but *Daana Veera Sura Karna*, with three main roles played by NTR and in which he, playing one character or other or as a combination, appeared on screen for four long hours, was a commercial success.

Many actors go through a process of transformation for a role. In a bid to do justice to the role, they take two or three months to prepare,
by learning what the character would do in real life, study the character in different situations, wear the appropriate costume and rehearse. Some actors go to the extent of changing their name during the film to have a feel of the character. NTR hardly could afford to do any of these. The pace he set for himself was hectic. Many films at a time; many characters at a time. Daana Veera Sura Karna was a tribute to not only NTR’s acting prowess but also his dedication to the craft.

The film released on 14 January 1977 was a remarkable success. This was the second film in Telugu after Lava Kusa to collect one crore rupees and the first movie to gross two crore rupees. The investment was a mere ten lakh rupees.

After watching the film, Gollapudi Maruthi Rao commented, ‘In the history of world cinema, Rex Harrison as Julius Caesar, Prithviraj Kapoor as Akbar and NTR as Suyodhana stand out. They are incomparable.’

NTR and ANR had not acted in a movie together for fourteen years after Srikrishnarjuna Yuddham which was released in 1963. NTR had the script of Chanakya Chandragupta ready for a number of years. He wanted to play the role of Chanakya in the movie. But he magnanimously offered the choice to ANR and ANR chose Chanakya’s role. NTR was the loser because Chanakya was his favourite part, which he had longed to portray. At the launch of the movie, NTR said, ‘In this movie, Chanakya’s role is pivotal. My brother has to earn greater fame than me in my film. That is why I have chosen him for the role of Chanakya. Now, my responsibility has increased. Brother ANR earned much fame by acting as Devadas. I want him to earn unrivalled fame as Chanakya and to achieve this, I will strive my best as director.’ Sivaji Ganesan played the role of Alexander in the film. NTR’s son Balakrishna was keen to act as Chandragupta with NTR acting as Chanakya in the movie but NTR was keen on making the film with ANR. Released on 25 August 1977, the film was not a commercial success. NTR’s son Balakrishna said, ‘The movie was destined to fail for wrong casting.’

NTR had many scripts ready in all respects and he wished to make them in a hurry. He owned a studio and so he mounted films in quick
succession and shot them when he was not acting in films of other producers. For one used to acting in ten films a year with ease and a man equipped with iron tenacity and discipline, he was left with plenty of time. In 1978, he produced and directed *Srirama Pattabhishekam* in which he played the roles of Rama and Ravana. He had not agreed to play the role of Rama when he was making *Sitaramakalyanam* in 1961 even though his co-producer and brother Trivikrama Rao urged him to act both the roles. NTR wanted a young man for the role of Rama and selected Haranath who was then in his early twenties. Nearly two decades later, NTR had no reservations in acting the dual roles of Rama and Ravana in this film. He had reached a stage when he believed that the audience would not like to see anyone other than himself in the role of Rama. The movie released in 1978 was not a success. 9 May 1979 saw the release of *Akbar Saleem Anarkali* directed by NTR. He played the role of Akbar and Balakrishna as Saleem. The novelty of this movie was music by C. Ramachandra and songs by Mohammad Rafi. The movie was rejected by the audience. And, on 29 May 1979, he released *Srimadvirata Parvam* in which he played five characters—Srikrishna, Arjuna, Brihannala, Suyodhana and Keechaka—in addition to wielding the megaphone. Though it ran for 100 days, it was not a commercial success.

In 1981, NTR produced and directed *Veerabrahmendraswamy Charitra*, a landmark picture in shaping his political life. The film has a lengthy prelude by which Veerabrahmam is sought to be established as a saint of such merit as the Buddha, Adi Sankara, Ramanuja and Vemana by depicting the core teachings of each. NTR donned each of these roles, the first three appearing on screen for just a few minutes each and the last one, being a Telugu person, whose verses are truisms which are fairly familiar to the literate...
and not-so literate Telugu people, a little longer, close to fifteen minutes, before turning to the main story of Veerabrahmam who was well known for hisprophecies. NTR positioned Veerabrahmam as a social reformer and more vividly as a foreteller of events. One prophecy that captured his imagination was that the actors would rule the land. While the saint recites this prophesy, the movie shows the pictures of MGR and Ronald Reagan. The censor board objected to this scene. In that part of the movie where NTR appears as Vemana, he asks his sister-in-law to give him her nose ring which he wanted to give to a prostitute. In a bid to enlighten him, she disrobes herself and bends backward. Seeing his sister-in-law, almost nude with her legs spread apart, Vemana is shaken and gives up the sensual pleasures and turns a yogi. The censor board objected to this scene also. NTR felt that the nude scene was crucial for the movie and it was not vulgar in any manner. He refused to carry out the cuts. What riled up NTR was that the censor’s decision was totally arbitrary. They did not specify the reasons for the suggested cuts. Typically, he counterattacked, fought on the ground that the decision of the censor board infringed the fundamental right of the producer to freedom of speech and expression. He won the case in the court but the legal battle took close to three years and, eventually, the movie was released on 29 November 1984 with over 100 prints. He wanted to release the movie himself but yielded to the pressures of film distributors and sold 50 per cent of the rights for Rs.2.5 crores. The picture was a huge commercial success, celebrating silver jubilee run.

In 1983, he directed Chandasasanudu in which he played dual roles. On the last day of the shooting of the movie, at Devarayamjal village, a suburb of Hyderabad, the scene required NTR, riding a bullock cart, to go after the villain, Rao Gopalarao, who ran ahead. NTR got on to the cart which was pulled by two strong Ongole bulls, holding a staff, a lion’s head carved out of wood at one end, in one hand and charnakola, the whip, in the other. He gently struck the bulls with the charnakola. The bulls began to trot as the villain ran. Until the noon, some shots were taken. When the last shot was being picturised, the cart moved about 100
yards or so when the staff got caught in the wheel of the cart. NTR did not notice it. The wheel broke with a loud crackle. The cart lost balance and went over a boulder. NTR was thrown off the cart and a wheel ran over him. All this happened in a flash. The unit members rushed to NTR and tried to help him. He refused help and got up himself, got onto the cart and resumed the shooting. His back bore the marks of the wheel and required treatment but only after the shooting was completed.

NTR had already entered the political arena by then.

The film was a success, running for 100 days.

In all, NTR directed sixteen films. If Srikrishna Satya also is added to his account, it was seventeen movies. Many of these pictures contain memorable moments; many went beyond the mood of an age and some of them would stay fresh as long as the Telugu movie survives.
January 3, 1983 was the last day of election campaign. Indira Gandhi and NTR reached Tirupati—Indira Gandhi by a helicopter and NTR by road. It was the grand finale. The electioneering had to come to a halt at sharp 4 p.m. Indira Gandhi had her lunch in Sri Venkateswara University Vice-Chancellor’s bungalow and went in a rally to the venue of the public meeting. The town bustled with people. Indira Gandhi’s face glowed with happiness. The Congress leaders heaved a sigh of relief. NTR was contesting from Tirupati also. He was on a whistle-stop tour of the villages around Tirupati after which he was scheduled to reach Tirupati and conclude the election campaign with the public meeting. Permission for NTR’s meeting was received very late and thus the meeting was pushed to the dying hours of electioneering, just about the time Indira Gandhi would conclude her speech.

For Indira Gandhi’s meeting, the Congress leaders had strained every nerve to collect the crowd. They had engaged many trucks to transport people from far and near to the venue of the meeting. The lorries were full. But to the shock of the organisers, many who reached the town by those trucks did not stay at the municipal school grounds where Indira Gandhi was to speak. They alighted at the ground and headed to see NTR. Nonetheless, at the start, the ground had a sizeable crowd when Indira Gandhi began her speech.

The TDP organisers had a brainwave. It was decided, on the spur of the moment, to get NTR to the town a little early and take out a rally. The TDP’s cycle rickshaws and auto rickshaws went round the town announcing through loudspeakers that NTR had arrived and was proceeding to the public meeting in a procession through the main streets of Tirupati.

The announcement reached the crowd at the municipal ground.
There was commotion. People began to rise and leave. The ground was emptying fast. Indira Gandhi was aghast. Local leaders made fervent appeals to the restive crowd to be seated. Some young leaders mingled with the crowd, pleading with folded hands to stay on. But to no avail.

Indira Gandhi raised her voice. ‘Don’t believe the hypocrites and don’t pay heed to the lies of the opposition,’ she said. She attacked NTR personally. She said cinema was different from politics. She was known to be charmer even though she was not a good speaker. Her charm had worked on the Telugu people until now. Even when she received the drubbing of her life in north India in the 1977 elections, she won handsomely in Andhra Pradesh. But now, the magic was not working. To add to her woes, on that day, the translator was bad. His guffaws invited laughter from the crowd. Indira Gandhi was not accustomed to such treatment. She went pale. Depressed, she finished her speech in a hurry and left for the airport. The faces of the Congress leaders were ashen. As she boarded the plane, she mumbled that she had been badly misled.

NTR’s tour, in contrast, was a celebration. People flanked the streets of Tirupati. It looked as though the entire population of the town had come on the streets to welcome NTR. Tirupati had not known such reception to any other leader in the past.
The meeting ground was packed to capacity. Lakhs of people had gathered to hear NTR. He appealed to them to uphold the dignity and pride of the Telugu people. He urged them to free the State from the slavery of thirty-five years. ‘He was a great speaker but that afternoon he was inspired. His oration rose to dizzying heights. He cast a spell on the audience,’ said Lakshminarayana who was among the audience.

The electioneering which NTR had begun in Tirupati concluded in Tirupati. A rough estimate was that he had covered 35,000 kms by road by the time the campaign ended.

The meetings at Tirupati were reported prominently by the newspapers. How they impacted on each other was the topic of heated discussion all over the State. The Congress party was shaken but it still was confident of a majority. It banked on the TDP’s lack of poll management skills.

For NTR, the *yagna* was over. His wife Basavarama Tharakam joined him in Tirupati. The two went up to Tirumala that evening. NTR tonsured his head as an offering to Lord Venkateswara and the next early morning, they went to the temple and worshipped the deity.
Nadendla reflected on those fateful moments in a span of one month between 15 August and 15 September 1984 and blamed Rama Lal’s inexperience and his own haste as the two most important reasons for his failure. He said Ram Lal ought to have taken a head count on 15 August when he presented MLAs supporting him. Ram Lal also had no business to grant an interview to NTR at Raj Bhavan on 16 August at around the same time as the oath taking ceremony. This and his arrest allowed NTR to garner public support, said Nadendla. About his own lapses, he lamented that he was short on patience. Had he acted after six months or so instead of on 15 August 1984, NTR would have been a sitting duck because by then he would have forfeited the support of the MLAs as also of the people because of a series of mistakes. His action then would have been hailed as exemplary and NTR would have walked into the sunset as the most unpopular chief minister ever of Andhra Pradesh, said Nadendla. He also blamed the media, especially, the Telugu print media, which he dubbed as extremely partisan, for conspiring against him and for deliberately twisting facts and misleading the gullible public.

By the middle of 1984, despite launching many path-breaking schemes and welfare measures to help the poor, NTR’s charisma was on the wane. His decisions were being questioned. The legislators were discontented. The employees were disenchanted. The general public had become somewhat wary of his decisions. The slide in his popularity was perceptible. Yet, because of the rash and premature action of Nadendla and the historic movement for restoration of democracy, the lapses of NTR were forgotten and forgiven by the people. He regained his stature as a leader of the masses. If the people had not rallied around NTR as they did, many legislators would have flocked to Nadendla, and, as claimed by him, NTR would have been packed off, never again to return to public life. Thus, Nadendla, ironically, proved NTR’s political saviour. With the movement for restoration of democracy, NTR emerged as an important
national leader and the Opposition parties seemed to perceive him as a leader who had the potential to humble Indira Gandhi at the Centre also.

More than three decades after this, in an interview, Nadendla gracelessly said that what NTR went through in 1984 in the USA was a simple angiogram, not a surgery and NTR had enacted a ‘drama’. While deposing before the Justice Sreeramulu Commission of Enquiry, in his cross-examination, he said a person who underwent heart surgery was required to take rest for a minimum period of two months. ‘How could he return home from the USA within 15 days after the surgery, move about in a vehicle throughout the State and deliver public speeches,’ he asked. True, open heart surgery normally called for two months of rest for recovery. NTR’s return from the USA just after fifteen days of surgery ruined Nadendla’s script. If NTR was confined to the hospital for convalescence in the USA for two months, as Nadendla had expected, who knows what might have happened. The odds might have favoured Nadendla but NTR foiled Nadendla’s chances by defying medical history. How could anyone stoop so low?

NTR’s wife, who underwent treatment for cancer in the USA and in Madras, succumbed to the disease in 1984 soon after NTR returned as chief minister.

NTR called on Indira Gandhi on 5 October 1984 at her office in Delhi. According to P.C. Alexander, ‘Indira Gandhi herself was extraordinarily courteous and friendly to him. NTR repeatedly thanked her for her message of condolences on the demise of his wife, addressing her very warmly as “our beloved prime minister”. NTR highlighted the severe drought conditions in some of the districts of Andhra Pradesh and, in response, the prime minister assured him she would, at the earliest opportunity, visit those districts. It was indeed a cordial meeting; …’ This was typical of Indira Gandhi. According to Girilal Jain, ‘Indira Gandhi was deeply emotional though for a variety of reasons she was afraid of showing it; anyone who cried before her could get almost anything out of her. She was very much of a mother; she loved even grownup people leaning on her.’

NTR had to undo many actions of Nadendla. Many officers who
were transferred by Nadendla had to return to their previous posts. However, H.J. Dora, who was brought from Warangal by Nadendla as DIG, Intelligence, continued in the same post with NTR. NTR relied on Dora for advice.

Though the August crisis was past and normalcy was restored, the situation in the TDP was horrendous. The party was not what it used to be. The old discipline was gone. The MLAs had changed vastly. They began to feel that their anna could retain power only because of their support. This gave them a sense of new-found freedom in dealing with NTR. They were no longer the quiet and submissive followers of NTR. They asserted themselves. They met him and could even summon the courage to directly ask for favours from him. NTR also was aware of what some MLAs did when they were held together in Mysore. Some had the temerity to demand under-garments too and they had to be provided. They had a life of fun and frolic. Their demands for creature comforts were nauseating, endless and grew by the day.

While NTR was brooding over the change in the attitude of the MLAs and wondering how he would survive as chief minister with dignity, Chandrababu who had herded the MLAs during the crisis in August-September 1984 in Mysore and who had made promises of many kinds to appease them was in an awkward situation. The MLAs approached him with demands of transfers of officers and allocation of contract works and mines and what not? He was not even a minister. He had grown in stature after the August 1984 crisis and he was not simply NTR’s son-in-law but an important leader, second only to NTR in the TDP. But such a position in the party still did not allow him much influence in the government. He also knew that even if he were a minister, his influence would be extremely limited unless NTR supported him, which was in the realm of impossibility. He had to discretely request the concerned ministers for favours taking up the cause of some MLAs but when the demands increased and the stakes went up, he too felt uncomfortable. He tried to talk to NTR about his predicament. NTR remained stiff and cold to his weak entreaties. He abhorred the idea of tactical compromise.

Chandrababu focused his attention on building the party from
the grassroots. He looked at the party cadres over the shoulders of the MLAs. He wanted the party to remain strong even if the MLAs rocked it. Chandrababu, who faced rough weather since he failed to measure up to the promises he had made to the MLAs, began to master the art of staying afloat during the turbulence. He was a politician and almost an antithesis of NTR.

NTR was not a political creature for whom retention of power by hook or crook was important even though he firmly believed that he was chosen by Providence to serve the poor, obsessed as he was by a compelling sense of private destiny. Most of the MLAs were persons of no consequence when he had selected them to contest the elections but now they thought he had become vulnerable and started making demands on him. The metamorphosis of the MLAs and the paradigm shift stunned NTR. He fixed them with looks of contempt but when the number of such MLAs increased, he turned melancholy. He felt violated. He was gloomy, aloof, distant and reserved. He concealed his feelings under a mask but the mask fell apart when he was alone. He was often found sitting on the chair and ruminating in silence.

His blank stare frightened his personal staff. His secretaries and staff were discreet. No one dared walk into his room except when he asked for them. They tiptoed into the room and waited for his instructions. But often, they encountered cold, silent stare. They were worried about the volcano erupting. The administration suffered. As St Paul wrote in his first epistle to the Corinthians: ‘For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?’ NTR’s uncertainty transmitted itself to the ministers and the top bureaucracy.

NTR was a bitter man. His ego was bruised badly. He hated the position he was now placed in. He was an emotional man but being an actor he concealed his rage and his cool public face
did not reveal the internal churning. He kept things to himself. He wondered if he had led the movement for restoration of democracy to be blackmailed like this. He had not bargained for a life in which he was reduced to a caricature of himself. His hope that the MLAs would serve the people and not seek private profit had been belied. He felt this was not good for the party, the people of the State and democracy. If the decline was not arrested, soon the government would face turbulence.

NTR prepared a list of about seventy constituencies, the MLAs of which were with him and whose back he wished to see if and when a mid-term poll was held. He asked Chalameswar to tour the constituencies and find suitable replacements. He had given a copy of the list to Thummala Chowdary also, asking him to carry out a similar exercise. When the two realised that they were given the same task, they went over to NTR and requested him to permit them to carry out the exercise jointly. Out of the seventy candidates who figured in the list, eventually, fifty were denied tickets. The remaining twenty were accommodated at the behest of Chandrababu and other senior leaders of the party.

What if he recommended dissolution of the Assembly and opted for a mid-term poll? NTR mulled over this idea. He knew the moment he recommended dissolution of the Assembly, Nadendla would be back on centre stage staking a claim to form the government. Vijayabhaskara Reddy, Union minister, was on record saying that the Assembly must run its full course of five years. Girilal Jain commented, ‘It is being said that in case an inconvenient chief minister seeks dissolution of the assembly, especially at a time inconvenient to the ruling party at the Centre, the Governor would be free to try and convert the chief minister’s majority into a minority. That is what “exploring the possibilities of an alternative government” means in plain words.’ He advised Indira Gandhi not to say that ‘she had been taken by surprise by the actions of some of those who speak in her name’. He held forth the view that the advice of a chief minister still commanding a majority in the legislature was binding on the Governor. Good advice but would Indira Gandhi pay heed to it? There also was the danger of the President’s rule being imposed on the State. Neither would serve his purpose, NTR thought. What else?
Indira Gandhi also was in agony that NTR was posing a serious threat to her. She wanted to checkmate him. Vengala Rao, who in the past was a popular chief minister of the State, had kept off Indira Gandhi for nearly six years. She had grown so desperate to stop NTR from his march on the political front that she herself contacted Vengala Rao and said, ‘It has been a long time since I spoke to you. Please come and meet me.’ Vengala Rao had avoided her when she sent messages through her emissaries. But when she herself, the country’s prime minister, telephoned him, he thought it would be impudent not to meet her. He went to Delhi and called her personal assistant. According to Vengala Rao, ‘That day she was running a high fever of 104° F. So, she was not giving any appointments. I stayed at K.L.N. Prasad’s residence in Delhi. She sent Fotedar to meet me with the message that she would send for me when the fever abated and asked me to stay in Delhi until then. Those days, to get an audience with Fotedar was a difficult proposition. When she sent him to meet me, it was a surprise and it raised quite a few eyebrows. The next night by 10° clock, her fever had come down. There was a phone call asking me to meet her just then. She was still very weak. Yet, she spoke to me for one hour. She asked me to help the Congress party in the State. I agreed.’ This shows how Indira Gandhi mended fences with a leader like Vengala Rao, who had been ignored for several years, and made peace with him just because she wished to prevent NTR from consolidating his position in the State and be a force to reckon with in the national politics.

While NTR was searching for a solution, Fate intervened, opening a new window of opportunity for him, a window that opened on an ominous note and the one that he would have liked not to open at all.

Indira Gandhi was assassinated.
Part III

six

MR. CLEAN, WHO?

V.P. Singh seemed to be the best man to have in the team led by Rajiv Gandhi. He was young and clean. Rajiv Gandhi and he were respectful of each other. He was the favourite minister, sitting to Rajiv Gandhi’s right in the cabinet meetings. Rajiv Gandhi trusted him completely.

V.P. Singh did not know much about economics or public finances. But having worked as commerce minister in the past, he knew a thing or two about tax evasion and foreign exchange violations. Besides, tax evasion was easy to understand. As finance minister, he left it to the bureaucrats to deal with the monetary policy and public finances. He focused on revenue: he was more a revenue minister than a finance minister. To help his cause in dealing with the revenues, he had V.C. Pandey, his classmate, as revenue secretary and Bhure Lal as the head of enforcement directorate. They were his allies, ever eager to carry out his wishes. The three were a deadly combination, soon unleashing a reign of terror on small and large business houses. V.P. Singh was delighted with the discomfiture of the leading industrialists and business tycoons, many of whom did not deserve a raid. It was a spectacle in the North Block, where the finance ministry is located, to find the three huddled together every working day at 5 p.m. with a lady press information officer in tow gleefully announcing their victims of the day to the media. The bigger the catch, greater the joy on their faces.

As finance minister, V.P. Singh’s behaviour was weird. He even refused to interact with industrialists individually or collectively. ‘How can a finance minister or prime minister not meet industrialists?’ wondered Pranab Mukherjee, who was finance minister for many years. Rajiv Gandhi watched the activities in the finance ministry helplessly even as a few victims of V.P. Singh’s raids turned out to be his personal
friends. But being a nice man, he did not question V.P. Singh.

Outwardly affable, V.P. Singh was clever in his conversation, concealing his true intentions. His elliptical answers made him an enigma.

V.P. Singh ordered an investigation into the foreign exchange violations of many persons. One of the specific targets was Ajitabh Bachchan, a family friend of Rajiv Gandhi. Ajitabh Bachchan had acquired a flat in Switzerland just about the time Bhure Lal, during a visit to the USA, had hired Fairfax, a private investigative agency, to detect cases of money stashed abroad.

There was no regular defence minister after moving out Arun Singh who had taken the country to the brink of war in the name of military exercises known as ‘Operation Brasstacks’ making Rajiv Gandhi loudly wonder if India was at war with Pakistan without his knowledge. After the indiscriminate and arbitrary arrests of business leaders such as S.L. Kirloskar, V.P. Singh had become a veritable nuisance and embarrassment to the prime minister. So, Rajiv Gandhi moved V.P. Singh to the defence ministry in January 1987.

Rajiv Gandhi himself doubled up as finance minister. The prime minister’s office swung into action and the revenue agencies were asked to justify many of their actions in the recent past.

While V.P. Singh was watching the developments in the finance ministry with dismay, a contract with West Germany’s HDW was making the news. The government had signed a contract on 11 December 1981 with HDW ignoring the claims of a competitor, a Swedish company, for the supply of four submarines at a cost of Rs.465 crore. Two of those submarines were to be built in Germany and two were to be assembled in India. Two more were to be ordered at a later date. In early 1987, two submarines built in Germany were delivered. By the time HDW delivered the first two submarines, it was fairly well-known that HDW had overcharged for the submarines. V.P. Singh wanted that efforts should be made to renegotiate the price with the Germans and bring it down for the last two submarines. After discussions, on 24 February 1987, India’s ambassador in Bonn sent a secret telegram to the defence
ministry that HDW was not ready to reduce the price because the cost included 7% commission which it had to pay anyway to the agent. V.P. Singh saw this telegram on 9 April 1987. Since it was the declared policy of the government not to have middlemen in the defence deals, V.P. Singh immediately ordered an enquiry. He did not consult Rajiv Gandhi before taking this action. Rajiv Gandhi considered this an unfriendly act. He felt that V.P. Singh’s order for an enquiry, coming as it did on the heels of the actions in the finance ministry, was yet another grave instance of challenging his authority.

During the debate on Fairfax in the Parliament, Buta Singh, Shiv Shankar, P. Chidambaram, H.K.L. Bhagat, Dinesh Singh, B.R. Bhagat, N.K.P. Salve and other selected Congress speakers attacked V.P. Singh viciously for not taking his ministerial colleagues and the prime minister into confidence on the defence deal probe and engagement of Fairfax. Fairfax was dubbed as a front for the CIA acting to destabilise the government. V.P. Singh spoke to Rajiv Gandhi about the vilification campaign carried on against him, hoping he would intervene and stop it but in vain. Rajiv Gandhi ordered a judicial enquiry, the terms of reference of which were a bunch of leading questions framed to damn V.P. Singh.

V.P. Singh resigned on 11 April 1987. ‘I have quit from office to nail the lie that I was over-ambitious and sticking to the chair. I hereby publicly declare that I will not hold any government office in my life,’ he said the next day.

V.P. Singh seemed to emerge as a rallying point for the disgruntled Congress leaders. Opposition leaders too were curious. R.K. Hegde, Devi Lal and Chandra Shekhar visited him and tried to know what he was up to. V.P. Singh, as was his wont, resorted to enigmatic statements, awkward pauses and vacant looks.

A totally unconnected event with V.P. Singh set in motion a political earthquake in India on 16 April 1987 when the Swedish radio broke the story that the Bofors contract signed on 24 March 1986 with India for the supply of 410 155-mm Howitzer guns for $1.4 billion (Rs.1437.72 crore) involved US $50 million (Rs.64 crore) commissions paid into a secret
Swiss bank accounts. The news report, following police investigation and seizure of damning evidence, was intended to show how murky the deals of Bofors were to the Swedish public. It was not meant to defame anyone in India. But the news shook the government in India since the Swedish report said middlemen were there and they were paid money. That set tremors in India.

The media and the Opposition parties seized the opportunity to grill the government. Rajiv Gandhi reacted as though he was caught personally while accepting the bribe. The official response was that the allegation of middlemen was ‘false, baseless and mischievous’ and an inexperienced Rajiv Gandhi rushed to the Lok Sabha to denounce the story. On 24 April 1987, he told the Lok Sabha: ‘You show us any evidence that there has been involvement of middlemen, of payoffs or of bribes or commissions. We will take action…To the best of our knowledge, there is no agent involved…’ With this, all that was required now was to prove that there were agents and such evidence had already tumbled out of the closet in Sweden.

Rajiv Gandhi was snobbish in his relations with President Zail Singh. He had not formally called on him for two years before March 1987. When the Bofors issue blew on his face, he met Zail Singh and briefed him of the developments indicating that Win Chadha might have received the money. Zail Singh was not satisfied with his explanation. He asked for evaluation reports on the merits and usefulness of the Bofors gun, field trial reports, financial evaluation reports on the guns and the comments of the finance ministry. Rajiv Gandhi and his coterie thought the President had limited powers under the Constitution to call for information and stated this in the reply to the President. The reply infuriated Zail Singh.

NTR who had been watching the developments until now curiously became animated with Rajiv Gandhi’s response to the President. He asked Rajiv Gandhi to reconsider his decision and place full facts before the President. The President was right in seeking information, he said. ‘But the President’s initiative had been given a short shrift by the prime minister quoting chapter and verse from the Constitution like a young...
‘A lawyer making his first appearance in court,’ NTR commented. NTR urged V.P. Singh to reveal the details of the deals. ‘The country is superior to the party and you should remember your duty to the country,’ he said. NTR genuinely believed that V.P. Singh knew a lot.

Zail Singh began to devise ways and means of getting even with Rajiv Gandhi. He invited retired and serving senior civil servants, politicians and journalists and sounded them about the options before him. He discussed with them his chances as President for a second term. He wondered loudly about a successor if Rajiv Gandhi was dismissed. Several names were considered but in his memoirs, he said, ‘I was clear in my mind that an elected Prime Minister enjoying the mandate and confidence of the House could not be removed. In the heart of my hearts I had no desire to take such a drastic step. I could not think of anything which would go against the spirit of the Constitution. Though I let the persons talk and vent their feelings, I held my own counsel.’ His admission that he let people speak suggests that he relished every possibility.

For the Haryana Assembly elections in July 1987, NTR campaigned extensively. The chaitanya ratham was pressed into service. The van was painted with slogans in Hindi. NTR’s son Harikrishna drove the van from Hyderabad and reached Gurgaon after two days. NTR covered the constituencies by the van, non-stop for five days, speaking from atop the van, sipping tea with the local people and resting in the van. He perhaps worked harder than even Devi Lal in the election. NTR predicted that Devi Lal was about to create history in the elections. The results proved him right. The Congress bagged just five seats out of 86 for which elections were held. ‘It was a victory without parallel, a thunderclap which produced a new political
superman, an N.T. Rama Rao of the north,’ reported India Today. The election proved disastrous for Rajiv Gandhi. He was seen as a weak leader, a man whose charisma was on the wane.

Meanwhile, the Opposition leaders assembled in AP Bhavan for selecting their presidential candidate. NTR had spoken to Zail Singh. Zail Singh told NTR that he would consider if he was the unanimous choice of all the Opposition parties. The CPM was not willing to support Zail Singh. R.K. Hegde, NTR and Devi Lal spent many hours in AP Bhavan collecting information about the Congress MPs who might indulge in cross-voting. The number did not cross 50. Zail Singh did not wish to bow out as a loser. He decided to hang up his boots. He wanted Upendra, who was waiting for his decision, to be told this. Clearly, NTR was hoping until the eleventh hour that Zail Singh would contest.

On July 15, R. Venkataraman was declared elected as the President of India. Rajiv Gandhi decided that the moment to strike at the dissidents had arrived. Arif Mohammed Khan, Arun Nehru and V.C. Shukla were expelled from the Congress party. V.P. Singh sent a letter to Rajiv Gandhi resigning from the party and the Rajya Sabha. But he was not allowed such exit from the Congress party. He was expelled.

Minister K.K. Tiwari, who had abused NTR regularly and against whom NTR had complained to the prime minister and the President of India, did not confine his criticism only to his political opponents. He had criticised President Zail Singh too in unspeakable terms. Zail Singh sent feelers to Rajiv Gandhi to chastise Tiwari but Rajiv Gandhi simply had ignored him. At the end of his tenure as the President, Zail Singh was to address the nation on the television. When the Doordarshan officials went to record his address, Zail Singh complained of ‘sore throat’ and
asked them to try the next day. ‘Sore throat’ was a ruse. It was a clear signal to drop Tiwari from the council of ministers. Rajiv Gandhi called on Zail Singh a day before he was demitting office. Zail Singh pressed his demand and conveyed that if Rajiv Gandhi did not oblige, he would use his power and sack Tiwari anyway. Zail Singh’s refusal to address the nation on the eve of his laying down office would have caused severe embarrassment to Rajiv Gandhi. So, he capitulated and asked Tiwari to send in his resignation.
Lakshmi Parvathi endeared herself to NTR with her ministrations. She was perceptive of his emotional and physical needs and attended to them. She seriously considered herself to be a people's leader in her own right since she had campaigned with NTR for the Assembly election which the TDP won spectacularly and everyone, grudgingly or otherwise, had to concede her contribution in the victory. NTR was such an egotist that he was intolerant of being told that there was anyone better than him. He would refuse to acknowledge anyone being superior to him. That was his nature. But in the case of Lakshmi Parvathi, quite inconsistent with his character, he not only acknowledged her contribution to his victory in the election but also in his rule as chief minister. She, in turn, sang his praise for ever and that worked wonders for her meteoric advancement in the political firmament.

Lakshmi Parvathi basked in the glory of NTR. She received credit for his health. In public, she gazed at him adoringly. Despite her claim that she had no political ambitions, the public started to perceive that she was the power behind a rejuvenated NTR. This development was not to the liking of the TDP seniors and to NTR's family members who considered her manipulative and exploitative. She was a usurper and a low-life. They also could neither digest nor agree with NTR's acknowledgment that her campaign contributed to the TDP's victory. They thought NTR was needlessly generous.

The Gymkhana grounds wore a festive look on 8 January 1995 when the film world felicitated NTR and his wife. Actors Mohan Babu, Rajasekhar, Krishna, Chiranjeevi, Venkatesh, Nagarjuna, Jagapathi Babu, Rajnikanth, Anil Kapoor, Sunil Dutt, Jamuna, Jayasudha, Jayachitra, Ramyakrishna, Roja, Vijayanirmala, Jeevitha and others turned up. Presiding over the function, Sivaji Ganesan wished NTR long life and quipped, ‘Next time I meet you, I wish to see you as prime minister.'
Rajasekhar presented a cheque of Rs.2 lakhs for the rice subsidy scheme. One conspicuous absentee was ANR. In his reply, NTR thanked the film fraternity for felicitating him but regretted the absence of ANR. ‘I do not know why he is angry with me. I have done him no wrong. Yet if he holds any grudge against me for any lapse on my part, I request him to forgive me,’ he said.

During his first tenure as chief minister, NTR had raised a few issues relating to the use of government land allotted to ANR for the construction of a film studio in Hyderabad. ANR was terribly upset that his friend of many years had stooped to hit him below the belt. The festering wound made him not to attend the felicitation function.

Immediately after the function, Lakshmi Parvathi swung into action and, with the help of Nagarjuna, ANR’s son, she mediated and succeeded in bringing NTR and ANR together. When ANR came over to meet NTR at his residence, it was like the old times again. Rancour or bitterness was behind them. The two met regularly thereafter and spent time reminiscing their early days in the film world, their pictures together and so on. NTR was thankful to Lakshmi Parvathi for bringing them together after so many years. Likewise, Lakshmi Parvathi made NTR mend fences with Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna, the music maestro, who had sworn not to step in Andhra Pradesh after the Sangitha Kala Academy of which he was the honorary chairman was abolished by NTR during his first stint as chief minister. Little things like these sparkled NTR’s personal life. Lakshmi Parvathi seemed to act like a cool balm to NTR’s parched emotional life.

NTR’s health was fragile. No one knew this better than Lakshmi Parvathi. She had to have contingency plans just in case his health condition suddenly worsened. She was aware that Chandrababu and NTR’s family members would never be nice to her. She was still young and had to think of a life of her own without NTR. Given her circumstances, the best case scenario for her was to carry on NTR’s legacy after him. Her life with NTR exposed her to politics from the lowest level to the highest. NTR hated group politics but Lakshmi Parvathi found a need to have her own group. In no time, she was surrounded by political leaders who swore loyalty to her. NTR was aware of new leaders who thronged his
home but he thought nothing of it.

Chandrababu and NTR’s family members who knew her political ambitions resented her and her coterie. She was strong with NTR’s support but alone she counted for nothing. Besides, she was no match to Chandrababu in political machinations. But blindsided by her sycophants, she underestimated Chandrababu. NTR too was oblivious of the contours of the power struggle. He was a great leader but as a politician, he was rather naïve. Like a child, he thought it was a battle between Lakshmi Parvathi and Chandrababu.

Though NTR encouraged Lakshmi Parvathi to be active in politics, when it came to governance, he relied on tested candidates who could deliver. NTR knew Chandrababu’s ability. Governance to NTR meant instant justice and instant gratification. For a man of his temperament, political life was not natural. But experience in government had taught him that in a democracy, governance did not mean instant results. It called for different skills. For him, the main thrust of his government was to serve the people through good administration. This agenda for NTR remained undiluted. Perhaps in spite of his wife, remarkably, a pragmatic NTR must have thought of Chandrababu as the only person who could steer the government ably. So, he entrusted to Chandrababu the two most important ministries of finance and revenue. Lakshmi Parvathi promptly took credit for this. No one liked her boast that she got the deal, least of all Chandrababu. It was too well known that weakening Chandrababu served her personal interest best and she actually was at it every single day notwithstanding her claims of innocence.

Lakshmi Parvathi was keen to carve out a place for herself in the party and the government. She was aspirational. Her privileged status as NTR’s wife allowed her to grow in stature and be acceptable to all groups. But she was in a tearing hurry to fulfil her soaring ambition and she was surrounded by a bunch of sycophants who made her see visions of wielding direct power rather quickly.

Nannapaneni Rajakumari, who was with the TDP until 1984 before she joined Nadendla and later the Congress (I), was perhaps the first person to sound the warning bell. She publicly alleged that Lakshmi Parvathi was indulging in a malicious campaign about NTR’s health. She
said when the people of the State thought the chief minister was hale and hearty, his wife was sending contrary and wrong signals that she washed his feet as he could not bend his legs and that she was spoon-feeding him as his hand did not function. She accused Lakshmi Parvathi of arrogance and questioned her belief that she was responsible for the landslide victory of the TDP. She said Lakshmi Parvathi was visiting districts with ministers accompanying her and the TDP leaders and workers were keeping her in good humour by offering costly gifts like saris and gold ornaments. Lakshmi Parvathi seemed to ignore the criticism but her acolytes rose in her defence. Muddukrishnama Naidu described her as his leader. When asked how he could address Lakshmi Parvathi as his leader when she was not holding any party post, he unabashedly said, ‘During the election, she had toured all the 23 districts and addressed public meetings along with NTR. People have accepted her as a leader next only to NTR.’

Lakshmi Parvathi by now was just not another housewife but a de facto chief minister. There was no denying her role in the party and the administration. She was accused of being an extra-constitutional authority and the BJP even made an unsuccessful attempt to make a privilege issue of this in the Assembly session. But NTR remained unfazed.

She mattered much to the ministers, legislators, industrialists and officials. There was a scramble among them to attract her attention. She was invited to all kinds of functions. She was opening show rooms and factories. She once cut the ribbon of a show room with four ministers in tow. Nannapaneni, her bête noire, accused that Lakshmi Parvathi demanded huge sums for her appearance in such events.

Sycophancy has its own rewards. There was Lakshmi Parvathi sara (hooch) in Dhoolpet area. An unauthorized colony near Film Nagar was named Smt. Laxmi Parvathamama Nagar where over 1000 families of workers and casual labourours lived. The tag ‘ama’ must have been added deliberately for effect. Boards carrying the name of Lakshmi Parvathi came up suddenly on all the four corners of the colony. The colony was given importance. Hyderabad Water Supply Board joined the game by supplying water to the colony regularly while neglecting supply to the nearby colonies where the taps had gone dry.
In a public meeting held in Ravindra Bharathi to honour Lakshmi Parvathi by a women’s organization, in the presence of Jayalalitha, chief minister of Tamil Nadu, who was the chief guest, NTR said he wished to see Lakshmi Parvathi as a people’s representative. It was clear that NTR was preparing the base to give her a position in the government.

Soon after this event, the district TDP conveners honoured NTR couple. ‘When I was besieged by self-doubts, when I wondered if I would be like this and speak like this, she stood by me like a rock, nursed me and inspired me. It is with a sense of gratitude that I married her. She is my better half. She has to dedicate herself to serve the public,’ NTR said.

This sent signals to the leaders and the people that Lakshmi Parvathi had deeply impressed NTR. Chandrababu’s foes and dissatisfied politicians took advantage of the situation, made a beeline to her and turned to her for help. Many exploited her but she was willing to go along with them to bolster her strength and image. What they could not tell NTR and what they wanted to tell NTR, they told her. NTR seemed to be susceptible to her influence as hers appeared to be the last voice in his ear. As NTR began to take note of her complaints and demands, her supporters stuck close enough to whisper into her ear. She was able to get things done easily. By and by, party leaders began to routinely meet Lakshmi Parvathi before meeting NTR and Chandrababu’s influence in the party started to diminish. This gave rise to a parallel power centre at NTR’s home. Lakshmi Parvathi began to dominate. A stage came when it was considered good enough to meet her and meeting NTR was not necessary. Officers too began to exploit the situation. They milled around the ministers who were close to her for good postings. Partymen crowded the corridors of power. Her house was a beehive of political and administrative decisions. Rumours made rounds that Lakshmi Parvathi
was amassing wealth.

Lakshmi Parvathi’s public appearances increased as her sycophants stepped up invitations to her for felicitations. Once, she was delighted that her fans made her go for thulabharam, with her sitting on one scale and one rupee coins on the other. Chandrababu was asked to be present and 12000 one rupee coins which she weighed were presented, as a beaming NTR watched, to Chandrababu to be used for rice subsidy scheme.

Then there was this auction in February taking sycophancy to another level. The occasion was the audio release function of Dasari Narayana Rao’s movie *Mayabazar*. The audio cassette was formally released by chief minister NTR by presenting the first cassette to Lakshmi Parvathi. Dasari Narayana Rao had a spark. He put up the cassette in Lakshmi Parvathi’s hands for auction declaring that the proceeds would go to Basavarama Tharakam Cancer Institute. The bid started with a reasonable amount of Rs.1000. Dasari’s bid was Rs.1 lakh. Rajasekhar’s bid was Rs.2 lakhs. His wife Jeevitha was aghast and held her head in her hands in anguish. To her relief, Sanjay Reddy, son of G.V. Krishna Reddy, came up with a bid of Rs.3 lakhs. Then Sandeep Reddy placed his bid at an astounding Rs.4 lakhs. Cine star Suman entered his bid at Rs.5 lakhs. Finally, the hammer went down for Rs.6 lakhs. The bidder was Sanjay Reddy. Lakshmi Parvathi was thrilled. It was clear that there were people ready to do the most outlandish things just to please her and be in her good books. Lakshmi Parvathi had indeed scaled great heights in the power pyramid, sitting almost at the top and all kinds of people looked up to her for favours, small and big. Whether this particular case of cassette bidding worked or not is anybody’s guess but according to Lakshmi Parvathi, soon after the cassette auction, G.V. Krishna Reddy wanted her to put in a word to NTR about granting approval for his power project. Her advice to him was to approach NTR directly and not waste time and money on any intermediary. If the project had merit, he would approve, she told him.

Lakshmi Parvathi was getting bad press. The Telugu newspapers in general and The Deccan Chronicle in English published unflattering, negative news on her daily. Far from being crushed by the criticism, she
remained nonchalant, dismissing the news as inspired by her detractors. NTR agreed with her.

Muddukrishnama Naidu stirred the hornet’s nest when in an informal conversation with the press, he made the statement that after 1996 parliamentary election, NTR would become the prime minister. He said NTR was instrumental in bringing the Opposition parties together and with the Congress losing power in many States, NTR was the man to watch. He might have said this because of his esteem or veneration for NTR or to please Lakshmi Parvathi or for any other reason but it gave rise to the question about who would be the chief minister if NTR became the prime minister. Muddukrishnama Naidu belonged to the inner circle of Lakshmi Parvathi group and, obviously, he was hinting at Lakshmi Parvathi’s ascent.

Lakshmi Parvathi’s flaw was lack of political experience. She craved for status and she wanted it quickly. She could not be blamed for pursuing her political ambitions considering her own poor background and NTR’s age and his declining health. She became a willing prisoner in the hands of Chandrababu’s rival group. Many nameless characters and fringe players milled around her and became centres of influence and power. Those leaders who had been in politics for decades trusting NTR’s sons-in-law and important ministers were feeling queasy. They poured their woes with Chandrababu and senior ministers but even Chandrababu was helpless. There was nothing Chandrababu could do to assuage their hurt feelings because it was clear that he was the target and he himself wanted a shoulder to cry on but found none. It became a routine for those who were close to Lakshmi Parvathi to badmouth about Chandrababu to NTR. Chandrababu group which relied on its own strength and political maturity had the support of the cadre but Lakshmi Parvathi’s group basked under NTR’s blazing sunshine. Accommodation between her and Chandrababu was not possible.

The division of the party and administration into two distinct groups affected the TDP’s rank and file also.

Lakshmi Parvathi was easily accessible. NTR watched her growing clout. He was not averse to Lakshmi Parvathi’s growth as a political leader. NTR was not easily accessible but even the most intractable
things too began to be got done through Lakshmi Parvathi. She prepared lists of candidates for the local bodies’ elections without taking into consideration the views of either Chandrababu or Daggubati. They were shown the lists just before the announcement. This escalated the rift between Lakshmi Parvathi and Chandrababu.

Elections to 98 municipalities and five corporations were announced to be held by 5 March. NTR was reluctant to campaign for municipal elections. Lakshmi Parvathi sensed an opportunity in this to prove her strength. Leadership is bestowed on those who enjoy the support of the people. NTR had proved this time and again. Chandrababu did not have that magnetic appeal. He lacked oratorical skills and charisma. So, Lakshmi Parvathi wanted to strike him at his weakness and prove to one and all that she was the people’s leader in the same league as NTR and place the question of her legitimacy beyond doubt. NTR seemed to collaborate with her in this adventure. She began to tour the districts. District leaders paid obeisance to her. They sang her praises. She was growing in stature. Her clout was enormous.

Lakshmi Parvathi is a good speaker, having a reasonable measure of the Indian mythology. She could recite stories, proverbs and poems from the mythologies and puranas which would go down well with the public. But her tours failed to achieve the object. There was not much turnout for her meetings. Without NTR next to her, she was ineffective. She was no crowd puller. While Lakshmi Parvathi was the shining star at NTR’s home, she amounted to nothing when dealing with the masses alone.

The municipal election results were not positive for the TDP. Congress won in 41 out of 91 municipalities. The Congress and the TDP won two corporations each with the CPI taking the fifth. NTR’s main political plank was anti-Congress but Lakshmi Parvathi diluted that. She built bridges with the Congress leaders. She even invited P.V. Narasimha Rao for dinner at their home, unthinkable for NTR’s supporters. NTR had blamed P.V. Narasimha Rao for supporting Nandendla in 1984. He had split the TDP in the Lok Sabha. NTR could not have any truck with such a man. But now the volte face annoyed many NTR followers. NTR justified their action saying, ‘On Ugadi, the Telugu New Year day, it is our duty to invite him when he is in the city and show our respect.’ By
this, he was actually rubbing salt on the wound. His fiercely loyal and fanatical Telugu brothers were upset. Lakshmi Parvathi was blamed for the electoral debacle. She refused to own responsibility for the poor show. The TDP had fared poorly in municipal elections even before, she said.

The National Front of which NTR was the chairman had practically folded up a few years before. Its office had been shut down unable to even pay rent and telephone bills. Election of NTR as chief minister of Andhra Pradesh revived the hopes of a national coalition of political outfits. Lalu Prasad Yadav won the Bihar Assembly election in April 1995. This further boosted the morale of the leaders of many political parties and revival of the National Front appeared imminent. NTR decided to host a breakfast meeting in Delhi in AP Bhavan for the leaders and chalk out the next course of action. Deve Gowda, Biju Patnaik, V.P. Singh, Ram Vilas Paswan, Sharad Yadav, S.R. Bommai and R.K. Hegde and other leaders participated in the meet. Karunanidhi could not attend as he was unwell. The Congress (I) was rocked by dissidence with N.D. Tewari and Arjun Singh in a rebellious mood. NTR was asked if he would meet them too in an effort to topple the Congress government. NTR contemptuously snapped: ‘I am interested in the nation; not in deceiving each other.’

The national press was keenly following the development. Elections to the Lok Sabha were not far away and a coalition government was on the cards. NTR looked a bright prospect for the top position at the national level.

Lalu Prasad Yadav hosted a party at his residence in Delhi. He invited leaders of many Opposition parties. His house and lawns were filled with about 1000 people from Delhi, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Side tables on the lawns were loaded with food and hot courses on warming dishes. On such occasions, NTR merely pecked at food. But according to Daggubati, Lakshmi Parvathi filled the plate with heaps of food, came over to NTR and began to spoon-feed him. All eyes suddenly fell on NTR. Photographers clicked their cameras. That was a perfect photo opportunity for the press. They clicked, according to Daggubati, that ‘unnatural romantic scene’ and the next morning, all the leading national newspapers flashed the photo of NTR being fed by Lakshmi Parvathi on the front pages, clearly conveying the message that NTR was invalid, so
invalid that he had to be fed by his wife. The photos of the meeting that afternoon with NTR as chairman of National Front did not make to the front pages. Photos of NTR fed by his wife did. That was depressing.

Even if NTR had some incapacity, Lakshmi Parvathi did not have to make a public display of that. Anyone who desired his good would not do what Lakshmi Parvathi did in public. She caused serious damage to the image of NTR by her action that night in Delhi. It can only be surmised that she was exposed to the national level leadership for the first time and in her anxiety to be seen as NTR's doting wife and be recognised as his sheet anchor, she went overboard. The result of her immaturity and this one indiscreet act of Lakshmi Parvathi meant to all those who mattered in the national politics that NTR did not figure at the top in the list of prospective candidates for the position of prime minister. NTR also was seen as a weak chief minister, his health being what it was on public display.

NTR was actually not as handicapped as Lakshmi Parvathi projected him to be in the national media. According to Daggubati, NTR had no problem in eating food. He could do it without anyone's assistance. Once, when Jayalalitha, Tamil Nadu chief minister, came to Hyderabad to discuss the Telugu Ganga project, NTR hosted dinner at his home in her honour and he perfectly served food all by himself and relished every item eating cleanly with his fingers without anyone's assistance.

In April, dissident Congress leader Rangarajan Kumaramangalam moved a cut motion in the Lok Sabha. NTR announced support of his MPs to the motion. When the press reporters asked NTR what would be the alternative if the Congress government was voted out when the motion was put to vote, NTR said he was the alternative adding to good effect that he was saying that as the chairman of the National Front. Lakshmi Parvathi sensed that the time had come for her to consolidate her status as next only to NTR so that she would not be hindered in becoming the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. Her main hurdle was Chandrababu and she was keen on destroying his support base so ruthlessly that he would be incapable of standing up to her when the top position in the State was up for grabs. She wanted to knock him out of the contest. As the rising star on the political horizon in the State,
Lakshmi Parvathi did not wish to have any peers.

The family members of NTR understood Lakshmi Parvathi’s plan. His sons, daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law put their heads together at a social gathering to work out a compromise between the two quarrelling political sons-in-law of NTR. It worked. They agreed to meet the threat of Lakshmi Parvathi jointly.

NTR had to give up Tekkali Assembly seat in preference to Hindupur seat. The by-election of Tekkali Assembly constituency was due on 27 May. Lakshmi Parvathi was keen to contest from Tekkali. NTR was only too willing to accommodate her wish. NTR’s family sensed danger in Lakshmi Parvathi becoming an MLA. The journey from an MLA to a minister was short. They rightly guessed that after becoming an MLA she would be at a shouting distance of NTR’s legacy. Harikrishna was the spoiler of her dream. He staked a claim to Tekkali seat and declared that he would contest as an independent if Lakshmi Parvathi was given the ticket. He was backed by NTR’s sons and daughters. He told his father to make up his mind by 13 April when the family members would gather for the inauguration of a renovated Tarakarama theatre and at Balakrishna’s house for the cradle ceremony of Balakrishna’s son. NTR prevaricated. Finally, NTR thought better of a head-on collision not only with Harikrishna but with all his family members and put an end to the controversy by giving the ticket to someone else.

NTR inaugurated the renovated theatre. Later, he went over to Balakrishna’s house and participated in the cradle ceremony. He was in a happy mood, chatting with his children and grandchildren and posing for photographs. Lakshmi Parvathi was not invited for the functions.

Tekkali by-election perhaps was the precursor to many twists and turns in NTR’s life. Lakshmi Parvathi was a woman scorned and her fury knew no bounds. She was vengeful. NTR turned aggressive against her critics. ‘She is my wife. She is doing what I want her to do. This is my party. I made you win. Why don’t you listen to me?’ he would thunder at the TDP leaders. On one occasion, he likened Lakshmi Parvathi to Satyabhama, Srikrishna’s consort, who accompanied him as his charioteer in the battle against the demons. When Srikrishna fell unconscious on the battlefield struck by Narakasura, she picked up the bow and fought
the war, finally killing demon Narakasura just before Srikrishna regained consciousness. ‘Likewise, Lakshmi Parvathi has helped me when I was not well, campaigned with me in the election and she is now advising me. What is wrong in that?’ he asked.

‘She was after power, real power. Power at the top. Not money,’ said Devineni Nehru about Lakshmi Parvathi. Devineni Nehru was in her camp when the power struggle broke out between her and Chandrababu. ‘If it was money that she was after, she would have been provided that without a second thought. When power was the goal post, the battle became intense and inevitable,’ he said.

Ministers supporting Lakshmi Parvathi appealed time and again to NTR to give her an official position befitting her status. They argued that she had the support of the people which was amply demonstrated in the Assembly elections and she deserved to be rewarded. They demanded she be made the general secretary of the party. Lakshmi Parvathi had succeeded in getting nominated posts for her supporters sending clear signals to one and all in the party and government that she was the shining star in NTR's firmament. If she was given a post in the party, she would consolidate her strength in the party and strike at the power base of Chandrababu. But NTR was hesitant to give her a party post because his son Harikrishna was strident in his criticism of Lakshmi Parvathi. NTR also feared that Lakshmi Parvathi’s nomination to a post in the party might breed disaffection in the party rank and file.

Election to 5000 primary agricultural cooperative societies was conducted in May. Thereafter, presidents of these PACs would elect 10 to 12 directors of District Cooperative Central Banks who would, in turn, elect the presidents. The TDP was in a position to win in all the DCCBs.

Lakshmi Parvathi undertook tours of Chittoor and Nellore districts with NTR's consent. NTR wanted her to travel by the government helicopter and so he went with her to Tirupati even though he had no official programme there. He and Lakshmi Parvathi disembarked at Tirupati. He proceeded to Tirumala while Lakshmi Parvathi commenced her political tour. Lakshmi Parvathi’s supporters wanted to make it a show of strength and denigrate Chandrababu and his group. They said she was another Jayalalitha. She was hailed as the next chief minister.
They stepped up their campaign against Chandrababu and fed NTR with favourable reports about her popularity.

Elections to the district co-operative banks proved decisive. Lakshmi Parvathi’s group which had gained power in the local bodies was eager to consolidate the gains. Lakshmi Parvathi’s plan was to defeat Chandrababu’s candidates. Since the elections were not held on party lines, Chandrababu’s group insisted that whoever had majority support should be made the president. NTR agreed to this. But she wanted her candidates to be elected especially in the districts where ministers loyal to Chandrababu had strong following. Sealed covers containing the names of persons, belonging to Lakshmi Parvathi’s group, to be elected were sent to these districts.

In the districts of Karimnagar, Nalgonda, Warangal, Khammam, Nizamabad, Kadapa and Vijayanagaram, sealed cover candidates lost and the leaders who were strong locally won. This was an unexpected blow to Lakshmi Parvathi group. NTR was angry that party directives were not followed. He refused to listen to the reasons for disobedience. He was intent on disciplinary action against those who had defied the party’s command.

NTR warned two ministers, Kadiyam Srihari and G. Nagesh and suspended eight MLAs of Telangana region for indiscipline and for defying the party whip, of whom five were from Karimnagar district and they were close to Chandrababu.

Meanwhile, in June NTR and Lakshmi Parvathi undertook a tour of Britain. The Telugu population received them with much warmth. In Birmingham, NTR went through medical tests which confirmed a clot in the brain that had caused him a paralytic stroke in 1993. The clot had remained intact. The report worried them. Otherwise, according to Lakshmi Parvathi, the tour went off well. In London, NTR was relaxed, speaking to the Telugu people settled there and urging them to make an investment in the State. NTR happily went window-shopping, buying many kinds of hats and suits. He went to the theatre and watched the Shakespeare’s plays for three nights in a row.

The reverie ended one night when Chandrababu called him on the telephone and talked to him about the dust kicked up by the decision
to renew licences to the distilleries. Just before NTR embarked on the
tour of Britain, he had approved a proposal to rene the licences of the
distilleries for the manufacture of liquor for sale in other States. There
was a prohibition in the State and the ethics of the decision to sell in
other States was called into question. The argument that the licence did
not infringe the prohibition policy did not cut ice with the critics. When
the criticism became voluble, Chandrababu called NTR on phone,
explained the matter and advised him to keep the decision on hold. NTR
gave his consent but Lakshmi Parvathi and her supporters saw a design
in this by Chandrababu to denigrate NTR.

As the struggle for supremacy in the TDP became intense, the
administration of the State suffered. Governance took a back seat and
politics occupied centre stage. The Communist parties told NTR to put
a full stop to the internal squabbles and end Lakshmi Parvathi’s role in
the administration. NTR was angry and asked the parties to mind their
own business. Lakshmi Parvathi tried her best to clip Chandrababu
of one portfolio. She thought that would depress him so much that he
would quit the government. But somehow her plan did not succeed. She
wondered why NTR was reluctant to dump Chandrababu.

Even though Chandrababu declared time and again that he had no
issues with NTR and that he would be the chief minister for life, NTR
was not convinced and yet, despite Lakshmi Parvathi’s direct and indirect
urging or nagging, he did not strip Chandrababu of the key portfolios
because he knew Chandrababu’s strengths.

Harikrishna meanwhile began touring the State. He was attracting
sizeable crowds. Devineni Nehru who was with Lakshmi Parvathi
group asked NTR what stand he (Nehru) should take with Harikrishna’s
meetings. NTR asked him to mobilise crowds for the meetings and rally
the cadre behind Harikrishna, telling him clearly that he was their leader
after him (NTR). NTR seemed to send conflicting signals.

The battle lines were drawn with Lakshmi Parvathi on one side and
Chandrababu on the other side. Chandrababu tried to remain quiet but
the provocation to get even was much too strong. His followers were
humiliated and he had to act to assuage their feelings. But Chandrababu
and his group did not know how to contend with the group led by
Lakshmi Parvathi. A clash with her would mean a fight with NTR. Lakshmi Parvathi was confident that however strong the opposite side was, they would not have the courage to cross swords with NTR.

The air was rife with the rumours of action against the leaders of Nalgonda, Nizamabad, Khammam and Vijayanagaram districts where also sealed cover candidates had lost. Madhava Reddy, a minister from Nalgonda who was very close to Chandrababu, appeared a sure target. The impression that trusting Chandrababu meant punishment was gaining currency. Chandrababu watched NTR’s raw aggression fuelled by Lakshmi Parvathi with dismay.

Chandrababu staged a show of strength when he met a stream of MLAs in his chambers signing a memorandum to NTR demanding revocation of suspension of eight MLAs. NTR ignored it.

In August, NTR was touring north Andhra districts holding the people’s darbars. The idea was to take the administration to the doorstep of the people. All the ministers were in the districts attending the meetings.

On 20 August 1995, NTR addressed a rally in Parvathipuram. After this, as he was walking to the helicopter, a youth sitting in the VIP enclosure caught hold of his feet by way of showing respect. NTR lost his balance, tripped and fell. He bled from the nose as the steel frame of his spectacles pierced through his nose. Lakshmi Parvathi was a few steps behind him. NTR took this as a bad omen.

Even as NTR and his ministers were busy with the programme of taking the administration to the people, politically there were two clear groups, each trying to outmanoeuvre the other. Lakshmi Parvathi’s group was keen on disciplinary action against minister Madhava Reddy and on expelling Ashok Gajapathi Raju and a few others. They all belonged to Chandrababu group. The idea was to axe Chandrababu morally.

A member of the disciplinary committee issued a statement that thirty-five other MLAs also were guilty of anti-party activities in the election of presidents of central banks and action would be taken against them too. This set in motion a flurry of activity of far reaching nature.

Chandrababu set up two units, one at Visakhapatnam with Ashok Gajapathi Raju as the head and the other at Hyderabad with Srihari and
Madhava Reddy at the helm to talk to the MLAs and sound them about the turbulence ahead and possible consequences.

An incident at Visakhapatnam widened the gulf between the two groups. NTR was about to leave for the public meeting. The police requested him to wait for a while. Reason? Rally by the supporters of Chandrababu. Chandrababu travelled in a convoy of about 40 cars in Visakhapatnam with fanfare quite unusual for a minister while NTR was in town. The rally was bigger than expected and so the normal traffic was halted for some time. Lakshmi Parvathi’s group was furious. They said Chandrababu should pull back and give way for NTR and not the other way round. They complained to NTR that the police were following Chandrababu’s orders. NTR’s vanity naturally was badly bruised. He became a fireball. He reached the venue 15 minutes after Chandrababu reached there. He was so angry that he even refused to look at Chandrababu. Chandrababu and Lakshmi Parvathi sat on either side of NTR on the dais. When Chandrababu’s hand accidentally touched NTR’s, NTR did not like it and recoiled as if he was bitten by a snake. Chandrababu tried to explain that the mistake occurred unknowingly but NTR refused to listen to him. Chandrababu realised that NTR was in no mood to reconcile and that he would not relent whatever be the explanation.

According to Lakshmi Parvathi, NTR was so furious that he told her, ‘This is a drama enacted by Chandrababu and Ramoji Rao. I must put an end to this. We are here to address the needs of the public. So, this cannot be interrupted. That is the reason for my silence. I will first drop him from the cabinet and then undertake ministerial expansion. Until then, let this remain a secret.’

Chandrababu spoke to Harikrishna from Visakhapatnam. He met Balakrishna there in a friend’s place. They discussed the possibilities. They were preparing for a show of strength.

At Visakhapatnam, Chandrababu along with a number of MLAs wanted to meet NTR and complain to him against Lakshmi Parvathi but the plan was aborted. Instead, a delegation consisting of Devender Goud, Ashok Gajapathi Raju and S.V. Subba Reddy was asked to meet NTR and request him to free the party and the government from the clutches
of Lakshmi Parvathi and plead for the revival of the party’s glory. If this attempt failed to yield the desired result, the plan was to gather at NTR’s residence and do dharna.

NTR was deficient in political judgment. He could not put things together and judge their consequences. He was like a straight arrow, who, with his brilliant eloquence, could be trusted to work magic on vast crowds, but certain to fail in a game of numbers. His obsession with his invincibility distorted his judgment and that made him commit errors. He failed to anticipate crises. Chandrababu was his contrast: cool and calculating; driven by deep insights, his thought process uninfluenced by emotions. He had the ability to think many matters at once, adjudge their interdependence and assess the impact of each.

The confrontation between the two groups escalated. There was tension in the air. At NTR’s home, disciplinary action was the buzz word. In Chandrababu’s camp, MLAs were brought together for some collective action, the dimensions and ramifications of which remained unclear for more than a day. NTR appeared unconcerned, almost stoical throughout. If he was tense, he had disguised it perfectly. The situation was fluid and a mixture of many voices. The word got out that there was a rebellion and it spread like wildfire. Even Chandrababu had no clue to the unfolding drama.
R.K. Hegde, MGR, NTR & Maneka Gandhi

Vajpayee, NTR & Charan Singh

With Ram Jethmalani

Biju Patnaik, Madhu Dandavate, R.K. Hegde & NTR