

Vicissitudes of Times on Visual Media

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Literature and movies constitute the visual media. Literature aims at educating, entertaining and edifying man. Movies too educate and edify, though entertainment of audience is the predominant motive besides garnering financial gains. A good book has as much of impact as a film. Both have the potential to contribute positively or negatively in shaping socio-cultural values. The sort of literature produced and the kind of films patronized directly manifest the prevailing value system in a particular society at a given point of time. This paper aims at showcasing the relationship between Telugu literature and Telugu movies.

Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani was hailed as the queen of Telugu social novels in the early seventies of twentieth century. In her novels one comes across affluent hero, poor or middle class heroine, plush bungalows, expensive cars, family issues and a happy ending. One generation of girls in Telugu speaking state was carried away by the impact of her novels and lived day dreaming for the prince charming to come and marry them. Neither family problems nor studies mattered to them in any way. Films made on the successful novels virtually transported the audience into a world of make-believe.

Prem Nagar, Chakravakam, Secretary, Jeevana Tharangalu among others were made into successful films creating a new class of audience. Dada Saheb Phalke award winner A. Nageswar Rao, Sobhan Babu and Chiranjeevi may be named as the actors who dominated this era with unchallenged supremacy. It is a moot point whether the novels and story made the films successful or artistic talent of the heroes contributed most for bringing literature and silver screen together.

Koduri Kausalya Devi started the practice of writing novels for films after her first novel 'Chakrabhramananam' [Whirring of wheel] won first prize in a contest conducted by a leading Telugu weekly magazine 'Andhra Prabha.' It was filmed as 'Dr Chakravarthi' with A. Nageswar Rao hitting the jackpot at the box office. Sridevi's 'Kaalatheeta Vyaktulu' [People beyond reckoning of time] was the source for another blockbuster film 'Chaduvukunna Ammaayilu' [Educated Girls]. The story was slightly altered while making the movie.

Yandamuri Veerendranath, a bank employee first wrote one act plays and dramas with contemporary social concerns as themes quite competently and soon became a popular dramatist. He ventured into fiction writing exercise with the active support of the editor of 'Andhra Boomi', a popular Telugu weekly magazine. It was also the time when the works of James Hadlee Chase, Irwing Wallace, Harold Robins, Arthur Hailey swayed a generation of readers in India. Robin Cook, Wilbur Smith among others were yet to make an impact.

Veerendranath's novels serialized every week created a new class of readers and he single handedly demolished the reign of women writers who dominated the scene unchallenged for nearly two decades. Arekapudi (Koduri) Kausalya Devi, Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani, Vasireddi Sita Devi, Muppala Ranganayakamma

and R.Sandhya Rani were most successful fiction writers with a strong following of their own.

Ranganayakamma's *Balipeetham* [Altar for Sacrifice] depicts the inter-caste marriage of a Brahmin girl and a dalit boy and consequent twists and turns in their lives. The novel conveyed a powerful social message. A film based on the novel with the same title was equally successful in elevating the stature of Sobhan Babu, the hero and Sarada the heroine who went on to win the 'Urvashi' award for three times in her career as an actress. *Krishnaveni* written in the form of correspondence between friends, an experiment in Telugu fiction writing, was made into a film which also proved to be successful.

Malladi Venkata Krishna Murthy, whose photo was never published, joined hands with Veerendranath in creating plots for films through literary works. Here a debate as to what characterises literariness in a text assumes significance. For film producers and directors successful works seem to be the inspiration for making a film. It was also the time when Telugu audience had a refined taste for fiction and films and were selective in expressing their appreciation. Whether they deliberately aimed at attracting film directors or not, Malladi and Yandamuri may be termed as master craftsmen in fiction writing. Narrative technique, plots and subplots, characterization were uniquely planned and exquisitely executed making them the most sought after and affluent writers. Creative writers of earlier generations were happy to get their works published, reviewed and read by those who are interested in patronizing literary works.

G.V.Krishna Rao's novel *Keelubommalu* [Puppets] was made into a gripping film, without much financial returns. D.Kesa Rao translated the novel into English for Macmillan & Co setting a high bench mark for all aspiring translators of literary texts. The black and white movie with brilliant performances by K. Jaggayya, Jamuna, Vasanthi and Gummadi Venkateswara Rao veteran actors in their own right besides able direction by Tapi Chanakya could not salvage the film as it bombed at the box office. This just proves that a literary master piece need not necessarily be a financially viable project on the silver screen.

Most of the films based on novels of Sarath Chandra, a Bengali writer, were disasters with the exception of *Devdas*, thanks to the handling of the theme by ace director Vedantam Raghavayya, originally a choreographer, touching performances by hero A.Nageswara Rao, heroine Savithri, and thespian S.V.Ranga Rao who could terrorise or make the audience shed tears with a subtle facial expression, raising the eye brow or a wry smile in addition to his inimitable style of dialogue delivery. It was also the time when Telugu people used to name their children especially boys after the famous public or literary figures of Bengal. Sarath's novels translated into Telugu were lapped up with unalloyed glee, as the talented translators extended an acceptable ambience with local nativity to make Bengali social practices look natural to Telugu readers. But this adulation failed to transform into mantra for success when the same masterpieces were made into movies.

Chiranjeevi, an excellent actor, became a leading hero mainly on account of popular novels written by Veerendranath for him. The novel and its filmy avatar *Abhilaasha* [

Longing] deals with the need to dispense with capital punishment, while 'Challenge' [*Money to the power of Money* in Telugu] shows how the enterprising hero looks for an opportunity to make success his way of life. Malladi's novel *Chantabbayi* [Little Fellow], a pet name for boys, became a huge success, thanks to director Jandhyala who projected the versatility of Chiranjeevi as a comic actor with impeccable timing in action and dialogue delivery. The entire movie is a brilliant exposition in the art of making a light hearted film to please the audience and still be financially successful. It is a different story that that the same actor became a politician starting a political party and was a minister in the Central Cabinet till 2014 general elections. He is a Rajya Sabha member now.

Soon after gaining independence in 1947, Telangana armed revolution by communist cadres in Nizam's state forced the leaders to seek shelter in the adjoining districts of Krishna, Godavari and Guntur, when Razaakars and state machinery unleashed a reign of unhindered terror and violence on them. Repression by Malabar Police in Andhra districts compelled the communists to go underground and reach Madras. That's how all leading lights of Telugu stage surfaced in Madras and tried to test their luck in filmdom. Actors, directors and writers with strong leftist leanings enriched Telugu silver screen then.

Those who were successful in literary arena also accomplished success as script writers, lyricists, and screen play wizards. Poets Sri Sri, Arudra, Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry, Devulapalli Krishna Sastry, Aniseti SubbaRao, Dasaradhi, Dr C. Narayana Reddy convincingly proved their worth both in literary arena and filmdom. Their qualitative endeavour enriched Telugu film songs, scripts, and screen plays. Arudra, the multifaceted writer who was a wizard with words, besides being a chess champion, scripted detective novels along with enduring fiction, experimenting with diverse ways of poetic expression and forms. He proved his mettle in justifying why Rama is a God in a film song of three minutes. He has the distinction of composing single handedly the entire literary history of Telugu speaking people in several volumes, a time bound programme. As a result of the tension built up during execution of the project Arudra had the misfortune of losing all his teeth one by one. Another erudite poet Samudrala Ragavacharya narrated entire story of *Ramayan* in a single song in the film 'Bhookailaas.' Unless a poet has strong command over the language, such experiments are not possible.

Sri Sri who is hailed as the pioneer of modern Telugu poetry was a good translator, who broke away with traditional writing and heralded a new era of socialistic ideology shaping Telugu poetry in the mid twentieth century. He was an ace script writer who provided dialogues to many successful movies dubbed into Telugu from other languages. He was associated with progressive writers association and then was a founder member of revolutionary writers, who openly supported Naxalite theory and activities of violence to establish a socialistic pattern of society.

Dr C. Narayana Reddy, who was awarded Gyan Pith for his modern classic *Viswambhara* continues to write poetry and lyrics for films even though he is more than eighty years of age. A venerated professor of Telugu in Osmania University, Dr Reddy was Vice-Chancellor of three Universities, Chairman of Official Languages

Commission, and a Rajya Sabha member. He forged an abiding friendship with actor turned politician N.T.RamaRao who was catapulted to power barely nine months after he launched Telugu Desam, a political party. Not a day passes in Hyderabad without Dr Narayana Reddy attending a literary meeting either as a speaker or as the Chief Guest even now. This practice is going on for more than five decades.

Viswanatha Satyanarayana who has received Gnan Pith award for his magnum opus *SrimadRamayana Kalpavrikshamu* could not succeed in filmdom, in spite of his multidimensional erudition, creativity and quick wit, having authored more than 100 books in all genres of literature. The film based on his historical novel *Eka Veera* was a colossal disaster financially. Strange are the ways of the film field!

Though fiction was patronized by the educated and elite sections, dramas continued to have their sway over the Telugu speaking land for several decades. It is said 'Kavyesh Natakam Ramyam.' A play also known as 'Drusya Kavya', is supposed to entertain, educate and edify. Metrical poems sung to set tunes embellished mythological plays, drawing huge crowds to the stage and theatre. 'Yaksha Gana' of Kannada speaking areas impacted street plays in Telugu 'Veedhi Natakam.' Dialogue delivery and action were loud, aimed at whistles in appreciation and requests for 'once more.' *Pandava Udyoga Vijayamulu, Sri Krihna Tulaabhaaram, Kurushetram*, penned by erudite, eminent scholars enthralled audience exceptionally for generations. When some of the poems recited in these plays were incorporated according to requirements of context, the movies too benefitted immensely. Thus most of the mythological films tasted success at the box office purely on account of liberal borrowing of themes and content from literary texts.

Social plays have a different story to narrate. Poet, fiction writer and dramatist Gurazada Apparao's master piece *Kanyasulkam* [Fee for buying girls] dwells on several social evils and superstitions permeating the contemporary society. A scathing attack is launched on certain social practices with wit and satire elevating the play. Recently centenary year of the play was celebrated. Dialogue in the play and several characters have become immortal. A powerful reformist message has been conveyed through the play. Several actors who enacted the role of protagonist found their way to the silver screen. Such is the popularity of the play. Unfortunately the movie based on this play miserably failed to impress audience, despite presence of talented actors, on account of commercial elements introduced to woo the people.

Telugu dramatists in the post independence era were far more fortunate than fiction writers. Many potential dramatists provided script, screen play, dialogue to movies and some of them turned into most popular actors in due course of time. While dramatists Bhamidipati Radha Krishna, D.V.Narasa Raju, N.R.Nandi, Modukuri Johnson, Ganesh Patro provided dialogue and screen play to films, some other writers like Jandhyala proved their mettle with the megaphone. Films directed by him offered healthy comedy and he ruled the roost for quite some time, introducing several actors who became stars in no time. Gollapudi Maruthi Rao, Tanikella Bharani and L.B.Sriram have distinguished themselves not only as competent playwrights but also as immensely popular actors. M.V.S.Haranatha Rao among others tested luck on the silver screen too.

Prior to 1947 and subsequently Telugu films highlighted struggle for freedom and major social problems. The very titles of the films reflect the themes chosen. 'Vandematarm', 'Gruha lakshmi', 'Sumangali', 'Maala Pilla' [Maala (a dalit caste) Girl], 'Varavikrayam', [Sale of Bridegroom] etc. There was perfect synchronization between movies and literature produced during those days.

In films produced after 1950 progressive writers and themes dear to them were predominantly on view. 1960s witnessed a shift in audience taste and family stories were patronized. It is just a reflection of the prevailing socio-literary scenario. 1970s were immensely influenced by English films, scripts and film making technique. Accordingly black and white films made way to colour films and use of technology was on the rise.

The decade also witnessed Naxalbari movement and its ramifications in Andhra Pradesh. Brilliant students, teachers and intellectuals were drawn towards it and went underground. A few films with socially relevant themes were made. Artistically satisfying films rarely offer good financial returns. These were no exceptions. A special genre of art films earned the acclaim of discerning lovers of art and literature. Avant-garde was the mantra then.

Border skirmishes and wars with China and Pakistan in 1962, 1966 and 1971 had provided scripts and material for films made in Telugu. They were not reflected in literature produced during the times except in poetry. As all know poets respond spontaneously to every event around them. Glorious poetry was on view. Likewise leftist movements and ideology had their own impact on films and literature in the form of songs, poems and short fiction.

Advent of Television, transmission in colour changed both film and literary fields. Slowly patronage declined to what riveted audience attention. Those who did not hesitate to buy books or borrow from libraries stopped reading altogether, as Television programmes and films telecast engaged them all the while.

The number of periodicals in Telugu plummeted alarmingly. Reading habit is virtually invisible among Telugu children. They watch cricket matches on T.V or prepare for academic examinations in coaching institutions. Their precious childhood is snatched from them inhumanly. One finds parents seldom encouraging their children to read good books with literary values these days. None need be blamed. Transforming socio-cultural scenario and shift in priorities have taken a heavy toll. Theatre going to see a movie with families is virtually on the wane.

Except in academic meetings or literary events where a book is launched or a writer is felicitated, not much discussion or common talk is noticeable about books. Only those who write and their ardent fans or blind followers evince an iota of interest in literary works and related activities.

However, technology made films highly appreciable and adequately applauded in theatres and films functions. Poetry continues to be written profusely, read selectively and discussed occasionally. Fiction has taken a different form and content is accordingly fashioned.

Films today are for entertainment only. Commercial aspect clouded artistic excellence and social relevance. They no longer try to communicate with audience or convey a message. Literature and literary works are confined to the writers and the faithful only!

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