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Malapilla (1938): A Struggle for the Representation of Harijans in the Cinematic Space

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Abstract

Aim: *This paper analyzes the 1938 Telugu film Malapilla (An Untouchable Girl) as an early cinematic representation of caste dynamics, focusing on the portrayal of Dalit struggles and societal conflicts. It examines the film's attempt to use romance and reformist ideals to bridge the caste divide and how cinema becomes a vehicle for both critique and cultural transformation during the pre-independence period.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The research employs a historical and critical analysis of Malapilla, contextualizing it within Telugu cinema's transition from mythological themes to social realism. The study investigates the narrative techniques and ideological underpinnings of the film, especially its engagement with nationalist sentiments and the reformist role of characters like Chawdhrayya.*

Outcome: *The study highlights how Malapilla navigates between caste identities and nationalist ideology, revealing the tension between tradition and modernity. It finds that while the film promotes caste reform, it paradoxically erases authentic Dalit representation through the casting of Kanchanamala in the lead role.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The analysis concludes that Malapilla offers a compelling example of early Indian cinema's role in shaping public discourse on caste and nationalism. However, it also suggests that the film's reformist stance is limited by its reluctance to authentically depict Dalit characters. Future studies on cinema's social impact could benefit from further exploring the intersection of media representation, caste, and political movements during India's colonial period.*

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Cinema is a powerful medium of one-way interaction. It addresses the gathered masses before the screen face-to-face with an argument of its own. It reaches the masses through its banners, songs and especially through the story-plot played in the cinema hall. There is a wide representation of themes/ topics varying from current virtues, society related struggles and patterns of living in a society. (Kumar, Feb 2014) It is a medium for spreading messages as it plays a role in bringing the social problems in front of the masses.

Culture is the underlying current of a society and the society thrives on its values and ideology through the medium of culture, therefore Cinema not only portrays a reflection of culture but it also shapes culture. (Kumar, Feb 2014) As I will be dealing with the topic of lower castes (Dalits), there is a need for me to bring culture in the further course of my article as culture plays a pivotal role. Culture includes the clothing pattern and dietary habits which do play a role in excluding a community. In Pre Independence and Post-Independence Period, Telugu Cinema has been made according to the demand of the hour. Film Producers have been bringing social, political, religious and other issues through cinematic screen. There are several cinemas made on the issue of women, peasants (*Rayatu Bidda*, 1939), Hindu Muslim Unity (*Ram Robert Rahim*, 1980), mythology (*Keelu Gorram*, 1949) but only a few when it comes to the aspect of Dalits.

If we flip through the pages of History, the evolution of cinematic space is a transition from theatrical space. In this due process, there is a major contribution of technology which has given this space modern attire. Moreover, with space, the theatre artistes too became a part of cinema which can be seen through the life of Legendary Telugu film actor Akkineni Nageshwara Rao (also called ANR), Gollapati Maruti Rao etc., who started their acting career as theatre artists but soon switched over to silver screen (Hindu, 2014).

As there was a transition from theatre to cinema, the themes of theatre which revolved on mythology too became a part of the early Telugu cinema themes. This can be seen when the Telugu Cinema industry originated in 1912, it released its first cinema— 'Bhisma Pratighna' in 1921. It was a silent cinema.

Later Silent cinemas focussing on 'Religion/ Hindu Mythology' was produced which revolved around religious parables, morals like 'Gajendra Moksham' (1930) and 'Matsyavatar'. The very first dialogical (also called talkie Film) Telugu cinema was 'Bhakta Prahlada' produced by H. M. Reddy and released on September 15, 1931. It was a play written by Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu (1853-1912). All these above named Cinemas reflect that the themes of theatre were carried forward into the cinematic space.

The main emphasis of my article is in relation to the lower castes of the society, the below Andhra theatrical forms show how the Lower Castes carved out their presence in the society through their oral story-telling which paved out a space for their own community to face the society. In these theatrical forms, there was a representation of lower castes but how much it is true for the cinematic space is a questionable factor. Did they become a part of the cinematic space?

There are different forms of Andhra theatrical cultures. Harikatha is a purely Vaishnavite form (Telugu Harikatha Sarvaswam). The artist wears a garland, chiratas in right hand, anklet bells to the legs, and wears dhoti. He puts the Vaishnava namam, removes shirt. His costumes, dress and shape appears like Narada and the form itself is generated from Narada Sampradaya of Maharashtra. The themes of Harikatha revolve around Mythology and Vaishnava Religion. The actors belonged to the upper castes as it is obvious from the fact that most of the Harikatha performances took place in the temple premises. Adibhatla Narayana Das is considered the father of the Andhra Harikatha.

Oggu katha is the representation of the Kuruma or the Shepherd caste. In this katha, Dhamaruka or Oggu as it is locally called plays the main role. Kuruma (shepherd caste) people believe that, Lord Shiva gave Dhamaruka to their ancestors to propagate the Mallanna (<http://apkuruma.org/history.asp>) and Beerappa (<http://apkuruma.org/history.asp>) stories. The story tellers of Oggu katha became priests among their caste people with a mirasi (Vatanu). They tell the stories of Mallanna and do the marriage firstly to Mallanna at the time of marriages of their caste people. This is purely ritual. Later with the passage of time, this Oggu Katha came out as an entertainment form. Chukka Sattaiah was

the first man who crossed the caste boundaries in relating to this ritual form and brought it as an entertainment form (entertainment means theatre performances).

Jangam katha has originated from Shaiva tradition and the artistes belong from Jangam caste (whose occupation is through begging). They (the artistes) wander in the streets and move from house to house to tell the stories. One main singer with tambura and one or two side singers with Dakkies (drum instrument) is the shape of the troupe. The narration always appears in dramatic way, particularly in dialogue version and till now it is performed by Jangams only. It can be seen as an entertainment show in some Government arranged programmes, All India Radio and Doordarshan. In Telangana region Jangam Katha is also known as Sarada katha.

Burra Katha (Burrakatha loses sheen sans patronage, 2013) has originated from Jangam katha for the purpose of the propagation of the policies of Communist party during Second World War and later it was converted as an entertainment form. The ancient art form of Burrakatha (Burra is a 'drum' that is shaped like a human skull (burra means skull in Telugu). In this tradition, gypsies narrate stories through beating this drum. It has been practised for ages by travelling minstrels, popularly known as Jangams - a gypsy tribe, has not only lost its patrons but its sheen and charm as well in this present era. A popular art form in the coastal districts of Andhra Region, Burrakatha was once used as a medium to awaken people, especially during the freedom struggle. In fact, the unsung heroes of the Chirala-Perala struggle (1912-13) were Burrakatha artistes, who played a key role in revving up popular opinion against the British Raj. So much so, that the British had banned the Burrakatha throughout the Madras Presidency. The Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad too did the same in the 1930s and 1940s when popular opinion mounted against his rule in the rural belt.

Bainedu katha formed for caste myth propagation and remained as Shakti cult form. Bavaneelu is a priest caste in Madiga Community and they tell Jamba puranam, the caste myth of Madiga caste people for Madiga Community. They use Jamudika as instrument and also known as Jamudika katha. Main singer uses Jamudika and the assistant operates the titti and bura, the Sruti instruments.

Bavaneelu only tell the village goddesses stories for the villagers and they became popular through these goddess myths.

Pandavula katha is a format generated from Pandavan katha of Gondi. Thoti a tribe depends on Gondi for their livelihood by singing their community myth i.e. Bheemapuranam. They use keekiri, a srithi instrument which is very similar to Sarangi of Rajasthan, Maddela and cymbals. Some thoti people migrated to villages and learnt telugu and they started the narration of Bheemapuranam in the name of pandavula katha. Main singer uses Tambura decorated with peacock hair and side singers use Maddela and Dakki. They tell their story to telugu people in telugu language. They use Cinema songs, actions like as in Burrakatha, and introduce all popular methods and it seems like as small drama.

In the Tamil speaking region, the theatrical form is known by the name “Villu Paatu” which is the bow-song (Varadpande, 1992). The folk stories were told which were accompanied by a stringed instrument resembling a bow. This art was popular among the Nadar and the Ezhava caste. With time their themes have also shifted to spreading awareness in society. All the above theatre forms show the existence of both the upper and lower castes.

When the whole transition to cinematic space was happening, the first social cinema in Telugu came up which dealt with the question of caste i.e., *Malapilla* (1938). *Malapilla* (an Untouchable Girl) cinema was released on 25th September 1938. This cinema was dedicated to the departed Andhra Congress leader Late Mr. K. Nageswar Rao Pantulu (Das, 1995). (Kasinadhuni Nageswararao, better known as Nageswara Rao Pantulu, was an Indian, journalist, nationalist, politician, and a staunch supporter of Khaddar movement. He participated in the Indian independence movement and in the Indian National Congress party, including Mahatma Gandhi’s civil disobedience movement through salt satyagraha. Gudavalli Ramabrahmam was the maker of first social cinema in Telugu i.e., *Malapilla*. It is claimed that *Malapilla* was the first ‘revolutionary, message carrying social film in Telugu. Such claims about Ramabrahmam and his contemporaries have made it possible for writers to lament

the passing of the golden age of Telugu cinema in the sixties. Guy (1985) and Sastry (1986), among others, argue that Telugu cinema had a distinct socio-political purpose before the sixties and label the age of purposeful cinema as the golden age of Telugu cinema. S.V. Srinivas makes a statement that Ramabrahmam's work holds importance because he was among the first 'filmmakers' in Telugu to construct a mode of address that took the question of cinema's purpose into active consideration. Cinema Samachar in July, 1938 termed Ramabrahmam as a 'veteran Telugu director' even before he finished making Malapilla.

A brief plot of the cinema: When the whole tussle to resolve the issue between the Congress, Dalits and the village Brahmins was going on, Nagaraju (Venkateswara Rao), the son of the temple priest Mallikarjuna Sarma (VV Subbaiah) and Sampalata (Kanchanamala), a Dalit elder Munayya's (Raghavan) daughter, fall in love. The growing intimacy between them is contrasted to the increasing tension and threat of violent confrontation between Dalits and Brahmins. The lovers are soon discovered by Munayya and after a brief separation accompanied by a major misunderstanding; the lovers elope to Calcutta, taking Anasuya (Sunderamma), Sampalata's younger sister, with them.

Meanwhile the anti-untouchability agitation enters a critical stage with the Brahmins preventing the Dalits from using the fresh water sources of the village. More than a highly successful and non-violent strike, soon supported by the Kamma farmers of the village, it is the rescue of Mallikarjuna Sarma's wife from a fire by the Dalits that results in the priest's decision to throw the temple open to Dalits. Upon hearing this news, Sampalata and Nagaraju return from Calcutta and on the day Dalits enter the temple, their parents consider their marriage.

In this cinema, romance and caste conflict run parallel. The Romantic part does not contribute in any significant way to the resolution of the caste conflict (despite the fact that Nagaraju's love for a Dalit girl is in itself presented as a mark of his modernity and large heartedness. In fact the eloped lovers are almost completely cut off from the happenings in the village and only a radio

announcement about the opening of the temple to the Dalits brings them back—not to be married but to be reconciled with their parents.

Initially, we get an impression that romance is central to the caste conflict resolution from the portrayal of the castes in conflict and the lovers as well as the timing of the lover's first meeting. The first meeting between the lovers takes place immediately after armed Brahmins confront a procession of Dalits and refuse to let them enter the temple. Congress volunteers prevent violence by lying down between the two groups. This scene, which ends with Munayya saying that the time had not yet come for them to enter the temple, is cut/ followed to Sampalata and her sister, Anasuya, singing in their isolated little place of worship which is tucked away in a cave. Nagaraju seeks permission from them to enter their temple and sits with them despite being told that they are untouchables.

This cinema revolves around the conflict between the Dalits and Brahmins of a Kalyanpuram village and its resolution by the intervention of the local Gandhian Chawdhrayya. It opens with a song—*Lera Lera, Needara manara, Harijana Vira kumara; Manavalu ninu Mala Mala ani, Duramu Cheseru kada.* (Get up from your sleep, oh! Harijana, son of a warrior. Men have discarded you by calling you Mala, Mala which is your caste).

The song exalts the Dalits (by the usage of the term *Harijana Vira Kumara*) in the targeted area in order to wake them up. Interestingly, the agency i.e., Harijana Seva Sangham (HSS) leads the area (is introduced early in the film). The process of naming the area (Kalyanpuram) and the agency which mobilizes the area also sets in the process for the transformation of the area itself. The opening sequence of this film is interesting because the oppressed group in question is represented/and seen as occupying not just geographical space but also a cultural and political space. The opening song is sung by a group of Harijana Seva Sangham activists who move in procession through the streets of the Dalit hamlet (Malapalli). The space/area which is shown on the screen is thus one that has to be transformed, whose inhabitants have not yet woken up. The space/area is depicted as visible by the agency (HSS) that will transform it.

The gaze of the camera is thus a transformative/reformist one. What appears on the screen will be reformed by the very act of the technology of rendering it visible. This is not only true of the oppressed groups (who will be organized and have their problems solved) but also the oppressors who too will change for the better during the course of the film. In this cinema, the power of the reformist gaze of the camera is demonstrated at crucial points when catastrophe descends—in the form of storm and fire—on the objects of the gaze. In *Malapilla*, where the practice of untouchability obstructs the romance of the son of a temple head priest and a Dalit girl on the one hand and forbids Dalits from temple entry on the other, two calamities are unleashed. The first is a raging storm that breaks out as soon as the father and the lover turn away the heroine from their respective houses. The second is a fire that not only traps the head priest's wife inside the house but also ends up leaving the priest and his wife, quite literally, without shelter.

Malapilla is a chronicle of the dawn of history: what we are shown is the formation of the nation which is imaged as a community that is unified despite social and economic inequalities. In *Malapilla*, there are numerous references to the absence of the practice of untouchability in the Vedas. It is a community that can lay claim to its past and its land. Notably, this claim is made by Chawdhryya, the Congressman leading the Dalits. Chawdhryya is an upper caste (the name suggests that he is a Kamma: a non-Brahmin and non-Dalit) Congressman who organizes the Dalits against the Brahmins but also preaches to the latter and reforms the former. Early in the film he is shown as the sole representative of the Dalits. He is thrown out of the house by his landlord for this but he merely says that he is a 'harijan' and without any fuss goes to the Dalit hamlet. The migration of the 'caste Hindu' to the hamlet is an indication that he has shed his caste and is thus qualified to reform both Brahmins and Dalits: the nationalist subject does not have a caste.

His speeches to Sarma play an important role in the Brahmin's transformation. In the last of them he convinces Sarma that there are 'untouchables' in every case. Simultaneously, he persuades the Dalits to

‘civilize’ themselves in order to acquire the moral authority to challenge the practice of untouchability. At one point he actually tells the Dalits that they are ill-treated by the upper castes because animal sacrifice, drunkenness and brawls have made them subhuman. He successfully implores them to give up the ritual sacrifice of animals and drunken celebrations at the altar of the folk goddess, *Poleramma*. In the cinema, *Poleramma* worship is an important signifier of the backwardness of the Dalits and it is implied that Dalits can enter Hindu society only when they are themselves adequately reformed. In this film it is only Chawdhryya who is in a position to overcome the pre-modern excess of caste. Neither the transformed Dalit nor the reformed Brahmin is allowed to stake their claim to this privilege.

It is possible to explain Chowdarayya’s role in terms of Ramabrahmam’s proximity to the non-Brahmin movement, and to his own caste origin (he was a Kamma). After all, *Prajamitra*, the paper edited by Ramabrahmam, often carried articles by important non-Brahmin intellectuals and Tapi Dharma Rao Naidu, one such figure, is credited for the screen adaptation of Malapilla’s story. As pointed out above, the film *Malapilla* was read by its Brahmin opponents as being a part of the Kamma onslaught on the Brahmin community. We therefore need to fully appreciate the pivotal role played by the character of Chawdhryya in shaping not only the resolution of the caste conflict in this film but also in shaping the portrayal of reformers to come in later Telugu cinemas.

There has been much recent work on the caste and gender markings of the nationalist subject. It has been pointed out that the ‘Indian’ is invisibly marked as Hindu, upper caste and male (Niranjana, 1992, 1996). The question, I would like to ask is what such a nationalist subject can accomplish. As pointed out earlier, Chawdhryya mediates between antagonistic caste groups and such a mediation is acceptable to both the communities because he is himself ‘casteless’. He sutures over the rupture in the social by ensuring that both groups shed their excess which, to borrow a phrase coined by Dhareshwar and Srivatsan (1996), is an ‘excess of identity’ that is directly attributed to their respective castes. This excess is named in the film as the orthodoxy of the Brahmins and the Dalits’

drunkenness and propensity to violence. Chawdhrayya alone is endowed with the ability to intervene in situations that otherwise do not brook interference by 'outsiders'. The family and caste are two institutions which are depicted as being closed to the interference of outsiders.

Early in the film Nagaraju is told by Munayya not to get involved with Dalit women. '*Me Kulallo Adavalu lera*' (Aren't there women in your caste?) he is asked. In the same scene Nagayya rushes threateningly towards Nagaraju only to be warned by Munayya not to interfere, implying that this is a family matter. Chawdhrayya, on the other hand, advises Sarma that he should re-establish contact with his son and also overrule the other Brahmins and open the village temple to Dalits. He also draws Sarma's attention to his son's large heartedness when he had stated that the son of a high family ('*peddinti bidida*', also implies upper caste-class family) would have chosen to marry a Dalit girl instead of his beautiful first cousin. As pointed out above he also asks Dalits to transform their religious practices. The deployment of a Chawdhrayya to resolve a caste conflict, but not a class conflict which is the subject of the latter film, also underscores the difficulty the national-modern itself has with the representation of caste. *Malapilla* tells us that caste is an excess that has to be shed—there was no untouchability in the 'Golden Age' and there is no caste in Calcutta (representing modernity or the village's future). Here, we realise that the romance has a distinct trajectory of its own and the lovers abandon the village for a modern space—Calcutta—in which caste differences do not threaten romantic love. On the contrary, all three characters thrive: Nagaraju gets a job which gives them access to wealth, Anasuya goes to school and Sampalata is seen reading her English lessons at home. Further, the model of modernist/nationalist Chawdhrayya is casteless.

There is an incident in the cinema which shows a blockage of water and the Malas take water from the *Muriki Kalava* (Dirty Pond). As a result, most of the people start dying due to lack of clean water. Seeing this situation Harijans go to the Chief Temple priest residence but the Priest carries on his puja and does not hear the Harijans who were standing outside in rain. As a result the Harijans say,

“Are we the Cattle to stay out and get wet, these Brahmins sit at home and do the Pujas with Camphor but they do not understand the hard work of the Malas. Brahmins are benefitted by all the comforts of food etc., but the Malas are gifted with all sorts of discomfort and die with hunger.” This cinema gives us a critique of Hindu Religion which spoke about the Dharma. The Malas express their anguish by saying in the name of Dharma the Harijans were bereft of all the privileges and rights, thereby, segregating them to the peripheries. The God is also criticized that when he made man- why did he create inequalities? One being benefitted of all the fruits and the other left with none.

In regard to this cinema, there can be another explanation/critique of how the star (in a Harijan role) is put in role in this cinema. Kanchanamala (the actress) played the role of Sampalatha, a Harijan girl in *Malapilla* cinema. We can ask the question—what was the result of her (Kanchanamala’s) casting? Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao wrote many years after the release of this cinema that “*There is no caste on the cinema screen... no ‘malapilla’ (a Dalit Girl) in Malapilla—there is only Kanchanamala.*” (Rao, 2000) He rejects the state of castelessness which is depicted in the cinema of inter-caste marriage. He objects the casting of Kanchanamala as it effectively blocks the realist aesthetic, which he suggests is in any case undermined by the fact that the character sings classical ragas and does other things that actual Dalits were supposedly incapable of doing. The actress and her sister are assigned with abilities that distinguish them from the rest of the Dalit community in the cinema. Therefore, the presence of Kanchanamala is very critical. Kodavatiganti brings his argument in his book—‘*Cinematology Sangharshana*’ (2000) that the ‘glamorous impersonates the ordinary’. (Rao, 2000) According to him, this has a political consequence as it evacuates the Dalit girl from a film about a Dalit girl. (Rao, 2000) It can be said that Kodavatiganti’s arguments is made in retrospection of the fact that that Kanchanamala was not yet the major star but she went on to become in the coming years after 1938. Therefore, *Malapilla* is an example of how the positivity role played by Kanchanamala rejects the specificity of the Dalit girl role. Kutumba Rao’s comment on the absence of Dalits in the film points to a larger

problem than authentic or inauthentic realisms. (According to him, the film would have been a total failure if a Dalit played the role, he adds.) Why is the malapilla of Malapilla not a Dalit? The casting of Kanchanamala in the role of the 'inauthentic' Dalit girl underwrites the narrative's attempt to erase all traces of her identity as a Dalit (what are supposedly characteristically Dalit traits are of course defined by the narrative itself). She worships Krishna, not *Poleramma*; has a keen interest in devotional music in addition to being a singer who is so talented that Nagaraju is deeply moved by her song and finally, she is the star Kanchanamala. The excess of stardom therefore reinforces the narrative which in any case works to produce an eroticized other. The end result is a Dalit who is doubly de-Dalitized. Both Sampalata/Kanchanamala and Chowdarayya are thus a part of the film's resolution of the problem of representing caste.

There were several protests in regard to this cinema as reported by newspapers: Madras Mail on October 1st 1938 reported that Malapilla cinema had received 'vigorous protests from Brahmins against the cinema and cited the review of one Pandrangi Kesava Rao who was asked to review the film in a meeting of Brahmins in Bezwada:

He thinks the cinema will create an impression on the public far different to that which the producers may have had in view.... The cinema deals with the love of a Brahmin youth for a Harijan girl, but, says Mr. Kesava Rao, the romance degenerates into immoral suggestions. Mr. Kesava Rao warns the Government that 'the so-called non-Brahmin movement has crystallized into a Kamma versus Brahmin movement in Andhradesa'.

(Madras Mail, 1938)

Another opponent reportedly stated 'anti-Brahmin feeling is visible everywhere in the villages'. Assuming the cinema has contributed to this state of affairs. Why did the opponents of the cinema fail to set the terms of debate on Malapilla despite the fact Brahmins control a significant number of journals (in respect that it spoke ill of their caste). Inturi Venkateswara Rao, who is himself a Brahmin but supported the film, recalls that some of the film's opponents changed their opinions after they saw the film. Rao cites an incident in Vijayawada to assert his

claim. In order to weaken the campaign against the film, a theatre in Vijayawada (upon Ramabrahmam's instructions) offered free tickets to Brahmins with topknots. This offer coincided with the meeting of Sanatanists in the town. A number of Brahmins saw the film and came out convinced that it was great. Rao's suggestion of the inbuilt value of the cinema would succeed because it gave a 'modern' solution to the existing caste system. Here, I bring in a supporter of the film named N. Pattabi Ramayya to elaborate this statement. He (N. Pattabi Ramayya) replied to the Brahmin groups by terming the cinema as an alleged anti-Brahminism 'a figment of the imagination'. He asserted:

I have witnessed the picture myself and I can, without fear of contradiction, assert that far from creating communal disharmony, Malapilla is a great picture of recent times which is calculated to solve the burning problem of untouchability.... The picture has already earned the encomiums of the public and the critics alike. It is becoming more and more popular day by day in every centre where it has been released, as evidenced from the great crowds attending each show. Leaders of public thought of all shades of opinion—Congress and non-Congress, officials and non-officials, Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries—have showered praise on the production and felicitated the producers. (Madras Mail, 1938)

While the opponents of the film claimed that the cinema divided the society and therefore led to the deterioration of the public domain whereas the supporters cited the widespread appreciation of the cinema by sections (Congress and Non-Congress) which were otherwise in opposition. Both sides however assumed that cinema should not divide society into hostile groups.

Malapilla takes the responsibility of explaining and justifying major socio-political transformations. The cinema has more essence of nationalist ideas which are demonstrated by the nationalist figures, the dedication of these films to prominent regional 'leaders' and the display of icons (Gandhi and Nehru and the charkha, tricolour, etc.), therefore, we can connect this cinema with the nationalism of this period (1930s). There are instances of long speeches made by

the Congress leaders, Chowdarayya (Suribabu) and Radhabayamma (Hemalata Devi) but the most interesting part is the caption on a portrait of Gandhi displayed prominently which reads *Yedukotla Harijanalanu Hindusamajamu Vadulukoledu* (Hindu society cannot let go of seven crore Harijans). What has to be done to retain them within 'Hindu society' is a major concern of the cinema.

In South India, Andhra region in particular, the accent, style and vocabulary used while speaking Telugu language can let a person guess the person's caste identity. The way Telugu language is spoken by the lower castes is not refined but whereas it is more refined and sanskratised in case of the upper castes. The higher the caste hierarchy, the language gets more refined. This aspect has been well-brought in the *Malapilla* cinema. The Harijans in this cinema address the Brahmins as *Baponoru* whereas the Brahmins call themselves as *Brahmanam*. Harijans are addressed as *Malavadhavalu, Malavalu, Malakukalu* by the Brahmins. When the Harijans want to get an access into the temple on the auspicious day of Mahashivaratri, one of the Brahmin elder goes and complaints to the chief priest—*aa pashuvulu dhatiki mana yuvakulu jhankutunaru* (because of those wild animals attack our youngsters are getting hurt), then the chief priest says *Janke variki eshwara sanidhyamu labhinchane* (our youth who are getting hurt, they will get into Lord's presence). The usage of words for addressing each other does carry a tinge of discrimination by both the castes.

One last point about this film is that the resolution of caste conflict between Brahmins and Dalits and the generational one is directly linked to the trajectory of the narrative's emotional construct of the plot. Social and familial harmony is restored by Sarma's change of heart, which in turn is based on the rescue of his wife by Dalits. The fire is caused when Nagaraju's grief stricken mother weeping pitifully and stroking his harmonium before his photograph and saying 'How could you leave your harmonium?' tips over a lamp. Prior to this, Dalits avoided violence when Nagayya's blow, aimed at Sarma, lands on Chowdarayya instead, injuring him seriously. These events which lead to a dramatic change of heart, do not affect the other Brahmins of the village. Interestingly, they remain staunch opponents of the abolition of untouchability till

the bitter end. Further, as the film draws to its conclusion, in complete contrast to earlier part of the film when Sarma is seen as being the most orthodox of the Brahmins and threatening at one point to fight to the finish even if he is abandoned by his son and the rest of his caste, they instigate Sarma, and failing that, insult him. In short, they are made guilty in retrospect and end up being blamed for the social crisis. Finally, the police physically remove them from the scene for disturbing order. Thus a riot between the Dalits and the Brahmins is prevented. It is the apologetic Sarma's customary right over the temple that results in the opening of the temple to the Dalits. The other Brahmins who are never personally affected by the earlier developments remain outside the melodrama and the reconciliation offered by it.

In the thirties (and forties), we can see that Telugu cinema themes were made with a nationalistic purpose as there was a demand on cinema to deliver the public regarding nationalism which was very essential for the creation of the nation during this period. More importantly, and this is why Ramabrahmam is so important for Telugu cinema, it is when the cinema addresses its audience as if it were the nation that on- and off-screen are ideally achieved, since the nation is perceived to result from the disappearance of all its resentment. For the middle-class public then, the establishment of the linkage between cinema and nationalist politics results automatically in the production of a unified public within the cinema hall because the discourse of nationalism is believed to have an inherent ability to constitute an undifferentiated public. Ramabrahmam's emotional construct of the cinema reinforces this faith in nationalism by constructing a 'nation' which is uplifting precisely because the films address the crying need for just such a public. Recognizing the contribution of Malapilla, a review of the film in *Andhra Bhoomi* (April 1938) declared that the talkie was commendable because it attempts to bring (internal) harmony to contemporary Hindu society. And it does so far more effectively than the speeches of political leaders or social reformers and the work of poets.

The period of this paper i.e., 1930s was crucial one in the colonial history of India. The electoral institutions and legislative methods of struggle were

emerging as the dominant forms of highlighting popular grievances in society. Politically, Gandhi and his method truth and non-violence were in full control of the anti-colonial struggle. The silent cinema has already been doing wonders by attracting crowds. The themes, opinions and crusades of popular entertainment, i.e., cinema therefore, reflected all these rather conflicting ideas and aspirations of the colonial society.

While tracing the growth of popular movements in modern period, historians so far have been relying upon archival material. They use contemporary press as a source of information. Historians are yet to consider that the visual medium like films can be a valuable source for serious historical study of Indian society. The media studies are increasingly attracting the attention of historians in the West. The study of feature films, for instance, is an important part of their historiography on the political, social and cultural change in the 20th century.

Cinema is one of the most modern and far reaching methods of influencing the social consciousness. Cinema is as important to a modern historian as what a temple art and architecture is to an ancient and medieval historian. Unlike the ancient and medieval historians, the contemporary historian of film is dealing with a new cultural product: Cinema. The projector created the cinema and through the cinema, film became the first mass medium in history. This medium was such that through it virtually any kind of views and information could be conveyed to almost every member of society.' (Pronoy, 1983)

While literature and theatre were the early vehicles of the spread of new nationalist ideas and cultural regeneration, from 1930s the medium of cinema took their place. In 1930s and 1940s several Telugu movies were produced articulating new perceptions on morality, social customs, value system, patriarchy and gender. The most dramatic aspect of the cultural and ideological mediation of cinema was the conflict between the colonial culture and traditional value system, for the nationalist intelligentsia was neither prepared totally to subordinate themselves to colonial culture and western modernity nor were they willing totally to reject the indigenous traditional value system.

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