Tradition and Modernity in Post-colonial Telugu Cinema: Representation of Child marriage and its Sanctity in Mangalaya Balam (1959)

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Abstract: The decolonized literatures and art forms evaluated the colonial modernity and persisting traditions. It is evaluated that there were two different discourses, reformist and revivalist, in colonial Andhra. Post-colonial Telugu cinema came up with third discourse in which both reformist and revivalist ideologies went hand in hand. This paper attempts to unearth the causation of such ideological stand taken by the Telugu Cinema of 1950s which not only interrogated child marriage but also sanctified the Hindu marriage. Mangalabayalam (1959) does not negate the tradition but negotiates with it in order to bring consensus between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Child marriage, colonial modernity, tradition, sanctity, Hindu marriage

The evil of child marriage was a persistent problem in Indian Hindu society. This led to the illiteracy and early widowhood during colonial period. The statistics about the child marriages during the colonial period inform us that this social evil was predominant in the Andhra region of Madras Presidency. The círcar districts (Ganjam, Visakapatnam, Godavary, Krishna and Guntur) reported the maximum cases of child marriage. The círcar districts had 11, 904 married girls below 4 years. Their number was 24, 257 in entire Madras Presidency. The first to criticize the social evil was a journal called People’s Friend. Dampuru Narsaiah, a Madras based teacher, established it. Soon, the Rajamundry Reform Association took a lead in addressing the evil practice and advocated minimum 14 years for girls and 18 years for boys for marriage. Different other Associations also tried to educate the society with regard to the child marriages.

The evil of child marriage was closely associated with kanyasulkam (bride price). The infant girls were married off to older men for money or other material gifts. The weak economic conditions forced the parents to sell the infant girls. The child marriages led to the young widowhood. The evil practice was prevalent in Brahmín and Vaisya castes in Andhra and was visible with low intensity even in Velamas and Viswabrahmans. The two castes were against widow marriage too. The evil practice was criticized by the newly emerging educated middle class. The issue was addressed in a form of movement by Veeresalingam and Rajamundry Social Reform Association. Despite the effort of Maharaja Ananda Gajapathi of Vijayanagaram to the government and Madras Legislature to pass a legislation to abolish the bride price and child marriage, the government was indifferent as it feared of the public unrest. Gurazada Apparao’s Kanyasulkam play towards the end of the 19th century left a remarkable impression on the issue of child marriage and its ramifications. The play was performed every nuke and corner of the Andhra to educate and sensitize the people of the evil practice.

The efforts of Veeresalingam and other reformers were successful to a limited extent in changing the cultural orientation of the people. Hence, the problem was yet to be taken up with intensive activity.

Native Marriage Act II of 1872 which set age of marriage for girls 14 and boys 18 and banned polygamy welcomed by the English educated intelligentsia. But the Act applied only to a microscopic minority as it was applicable for only those who did not practice any recognized religion. The Act allowed only civil marriages according to which the marriage takes place only under the supervision of Registrar as was desired by only Arya Samaj. The Act amended in 1923 brought the Hindus under its purview provided that they do not recite rituals, etc., and the couple does not follow the Hindu Law while dividing the property and also divorce is allowed under the Indian Divorce Act of 1869 which was originally meant for Christians. The age of Consent Bill was introduced in vice-regal Council on 9th January 1891 and was made law on 19th March 1891. The marriageable age of girls was raised to twelve from ten (the 1860 Indian Penal Code had set 10 as the marriageable age of girls).

It was caste associations and women’s associations that took forward the social reform activity in Andhra since the second decade of the 20th century. The women’s associations like Andhra Mahila Sabha and caste associations like Andhra Kshatriya Mahasabha, Vaisya Mahasabha, Arya Vaisya Mahasabha, Kamma conferences,
Reddy annual meetings and Viswabrahmana Mahasabha asked their caste people not to encourage child marriages. The enactment of Sarada Act in 1929 which put minimum age for marriage 14 for women and 18 for men received both welcome and opposition. Opposition was from orthodox sections across the castes. There were many instances where these opposing sections performed child marriages in public. They even organized All India Stree Sanatana Dharma Mahasabha and All India Satana Dharama Mahasabha. However, the reform sections of the same castes and women’s associations could assert and support the act. The Andhra Mahila Sabha requested the government to increase the minimum marital age for women from 14 to 16 years. The rate of child marriages was more in coastal districts than in Ceded districts.ii

Despite a vibrant social reform activity in Andhra during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, social evils still existed. Hence, after independence, the Indian government brought the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 into force which fixed the marriage age as 18 and 15 for boy and girl respectively. It made bigamy punishable too.

The newly emerged sovereign Indian State’s prime agenda was to reconstruct India in socio-political and economic aspects which had been destabilized during the colonial era. Focus of the study would be in what respect were the cultural practices dealt with. The India’s ruling classes took a stand of negotiating between tradition and modernity. The evil practices were resented on one hand and religion and culture were respected on the other. Child marriage was addressed by exposing its ramifications. The sanctity of Hindu marriage was also respected. 1950s Telugu cinema is the best testimony for this development. Cinema is a medium that represents contemporary society with objective reality vi. Telugu cinema played the same role by representing certain religious and cultural practices. The issue of child marriage is one of the major social problems it represented. It also represented and respected sanctity of Hindu Marriage. Mangalyabalam (1959) falls under such category.

The movie represented the contradiction between colonial modernity and traditional value system. It on one hand enlightens the people that child marriage would lead to punishment and on the other advocates the sanctity of Hindu marriage. The cause of early society’s backwardness was conceived to be illiteracy. But the movie represents an urban educated man and a woman who instead of negating the traditional value system (child marriage) negotiate with it.

An old generation woman, Parvathamma, gets her cross grandchildren Chandram (10) and Saroja (7) married without the knowledge of Saroja’s parents. Her son Paparao and daughter-in-law Kantham (parents of the girl), later, resent the marriage and move the court, a colonial modernist institution. The court not only nullifies the child marriage but also punished the father of the boy and priest who are held responsible for the marriage. When Chandram and Saroja grow adults and are also educated, they consider the marriage to be sanctified though it was a child marriage which had occurred without their consent and consciousness. Not only Chandram and Saroja but also Suryam, Saroja’s brother who is educated in Medicine, advocates to respecting the institution of marriage according to Hindu norms.

Saroja falls in love with Sekhar. Sekhar is actually Chandram whom she had been married during childhood. Knowing the fact that he had been married to her, Sekhar, without revealing his identity, succeeds in gaining her love. She suddenly disconnects with him as soon as she comes to know that she as a child was married to another man. Her brother remembers it. He by seeing Saroja moving intimate with Sekhar alerts her that she was married to Chandram. When she is shocked, he consoles her and fills confidence in her. His words to her advocate and propagate the Hindu traditional value system. He says, “Sister, do not be saddened. I can understand your pain and agitation. This is agnipareeksha for you. Have faith that you still can stand on. (Saroja collects the mangalasutra from him). You are a matured woman who knows what is right what is wrong. You need not worry. This mangalyabalam (title of the movie) itself would give you ‘will power’.”

She bears the pain to separate herself from her beloved Sekhar. She is painful. Despite pain, she honors the sanctity of Hindu marriage. She even fights her parents and leaves with her childhood husband Chandram. The family is divided into two groups. One is in favour of childhood marriage and the other against it. Parvathamma, Suryam and Saroja are in favour whereas Saroja’s parents are against it.

The movie proceeded negotiating between tradition and modernity. It represented the contemporary social reality. One may pose a question, “how come a land with rich legacy of social reform movement could accept the child marriage?” The reformist ideology swept across the Telugu districts of Madras Presidency. Woman
and untouchability were the objects of Reform. Reform movement could not bring change in Toto. Though legislations came into force before and after independence, the evil practices in traditional value system were not completely uprooted. Instead, the traditional values and the colonial modernity went hand in hand. Child marriages did not stop down the decades of independence. It was the social reality. Child marriage is multi-causal. Bride price was one of them. Another is to establish the authority of the elders over the children. One more reason is to satisfy the souls of parents of the children. Last two are the reasons behind child marriage in the movie. Parvathamma’s daughter aspires to get her son Chandram married to her brother’s daughter Saroja. Parvathamma fulfills her desire by performing (child) marriage.

The sanctity of Hindu marriage is respected in the movie. The title of the movie Mangalya Balam itself means “the power of Thali” (Thali is a sacred thread with turmeric tied by the groom to the neck of bride which legalizes the marriage. It is called Mangalyam too). Once it is tied to the neck of any woman by any man, it would be considered as a legal marriage according to Hindu tradition. Both educated man Chandram (Sekhar) and educated woman Saroja respect the sanctity of Hindu marriage. Once Saroja comes to know about it from her brother Suryam, she stops communicating and engaging with Chandram (he is known to her as Suryam). He tries the best to meet her and reveal the truth but in vain. Paparao and Kantham want to warn him not to engage with their daughter. When he comes to their house, he reveals that he is their nephew and son-in-law. They say they broke that relationship long back he says nobody can break that bond. He says, “You cannot separate me with Saroja even by shooting dead. We are a married couple irrespective of whether you endorse it or not. This is ‘sacred relationship’. This bondage cannot be broken by anybody”. He means that Hindu marriage is so sacred and sanctified that it can not be broken by anybody including courts which is a representative of colonial modernity.

The Hindu tradition drove, though she is educated, Saroja to determine to accept her marriage which happened without her consent or her consciousness during her childhood. This decision is even against her conscious love for Sekhar. She does not know that it is Sekhar himself who married her during childhood. She is afraid that she may go against the tradition she has been brought up in. She expresses her pain to her grandmother Parvathamma who actually performed the marriage. The Hindu tradition propagates that if the set social norms and traditional values are not followed, the violator would fall in hell. She is afraid if she really can go back to her husband. The grandmother boosts her morale. She says she would succeed in upholding traditional value system if she takes the footsteps of ideal women like Seetha, Savitri, Anasuya.

Saroja: Grandmother! Can I stand morally high and avoid this ‘paapa koopam’?

Parvathamma: You would stand. You have that strength. The land you are born in is such sacred one. It is the mother land of greatest ideal women like Seetha, Savithri. Do walk in their footsteps. No “calamity” can stop you.

The patriarchy operates within the framework of Master and servant. Patriarchy is the driving force of Indian Hindu family functioning. Senior male is the head of the family and so father is the head. If father is no more, eldest son would become the head. Woman is always subordinate to husband and other in-laws. Woman is a devoted wife in the family. She respects Thali. She is the devotee of her husband and is obedient too. Marriage is the most sanctified and respected ritual in Hindu society. Saroja touches the Thali to her eyes when it was given to her by Suryam. That indicates her respect not only to Thali, but the entire Hindu values. She touches the feet of Chandram when she comes to know he is her husband.

Hindu society believed in one marriage in lifetime for women. Going against it is equal to violating Hindu Dharma. The parents of Saroja are in process of fixing match for her with Kailasam. Parvathamma opposes it. She believes in Hindu Dharma. She tries to educate them that they would get sin if they get Saroja married again.

Hindu marriage establishes importance of husband for wife. The narratives of Sati Savitri are familiar to the Hindus. She was an ideal wife who fought against the Yama the king of Hell. She could bring back her deceased husband from hell. Her vigorous struggle is admired. She became role model. She has been ideal wife. Saroja is seen to be similar to Sati Savitri as she also protects her husband Sekhar form her father. When Saroja manages to escape along with her husband to in-law’s home, her enraged father Paparao finds them in the fields and tries to shoot Sekhar. Saroja stands in front of her husband and is rather ready to be killed to protect him. Her father asks her to move away but she is reluctant.
Conclusion

The Telugu cinema in the early decades of India’s independence played the role of a negotiating agent between tradition and modernity. The movie Mangalyabalam tried to negotiate between traditional Hindu marriage and modern Indian law. The socio-political and economic context was the reason behind producing these movies. The women’s issues represented were still prevalent in the contemporary society which lured the movie producers to make movies with the social reform theme as in order to attract the audience. The Telugu cinema fell in the framework of Nehru’s reconstruction agenda to build new India. For the progress of the nation, social contradictions needed to be mitigated. The issues that were taken up during the social reform period were well represented which sensitized the public. It was the need of the hour to represent, interrogate and negotiate with the social norms hostile to half the section of the society that is women. Despite a rich social reform movement in Andhra, the social evils had not been eradicated even after India had emerged independent. Child marriage was still prevalent even after the independence despite much legal measure to prohibit it. The Telugu cinema as an art form could not escape from its social responsibility of reflecting the contemporary social issues despite its bourgeoisie character. It followed the footsteps of social reformers by advocating reforming women’s position in the society. As Ailury Murali suggests the social reformers had not strived for complete liberation of women. “Dual attitude of the intelligentsia was visible while prescribing the type of education for women. The women were imparted only traditional education and not the professional courses and modern science which were emphasized in boys’ education. They were imparted the life stories of great Indian women like Sita, Savitri, Anasuya. K N Panikkar articulates it as public veneration and private humiliation”.

The Telugu cinema in a way discarded even the same principle by advocating reform but not radical change in the position of women. It, in fact, tried to restore the traditional value system by solemnizing the child marriage by ruling out the colonial modern legal institution. Still, it contributed to the process of cultural evolution of Telugu society by showing the legal system can prosecute those who violate the child marriage act. Telugu cinema played a supportive role to the contemporary ruling class. The post-colonial ruling class, as it had to retain power through parliamentary democratic means, intended to restore the power in the hands of rural gentry which was the symbol of feudal patriarchal values system. Cinema propogated the same ideology. Another reason why the post-colonial Telugu cinema supported the ideology of restoring traditional value system was that most of the movie makers had hailed from the class of rural gentry which was pumping capital to them from agricultural surplus which was the joint family property. Thus the movie instead of negating the traditional value system negotiates it with modern legality. It on one hand tries to enlighten the society that child marriage is illegal according to modern Indian law and on the other hand sanctifies the Hindu marriage even if it is child marriage.

Endnotes

iv Census of India, 1891, Vol, XIII, p. 274.
vi Ibid. P. 49.
xii Ibid. P. 590.

