CHAPTER IV

REFRACTION OF CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL
STRUGGLES IN TELUGU CINEMA 1938–1947
Colonial Capitalism and Cultural Feudalism: Ideological Construction of Harijan Issue in Mala Pilla and Rytu Bidda

The ideological moorings of Harijan issue as refracted in Mala Pilla and the rich peasant class strive for partial liberation of agristic slaves from feudal domination in Rytu Bidda will have to be contextualised.

At material level, the particularities of colonial commercialisation of agriculture which is described in historiography as 'colonial capitalism' created differential social and cultural changes in the ryotwari and Zamindari areas. In the ryotwari areas, the development of commodity production, marketing system, price rise, high rentals, unequal revenue burdens and system of peasant money lending helped the emergence and consolidation of rich peasant class by 1920s.¹ This had a particular bearing on polarisation of agrarian social structure, where the ryots with a defined title to the land turned into an actual entrepreneurial cultivators.² Right from 1920s, it was this entrepreneurial peasant cultivators who were at the centre of social and political struggles.³ In the realm of culture the old

²This category of ryots were the hard working, enterprising, intelligent, skillful and businesslike cultivators.
³For details, see Atlury Murali, Social Change and Nature of Social Participation in National Movement in Andhra, 1905-1934,
feudal value system and the social practices like *untouchability* have been hindering the process of transition of traditional agricultural labouring castes into wage labour. Without liberating agricultural labour from feudal cultural value *system*, the market oriented agriculture would not take off as the wage labour will not be available for production. Naturally, the peasant entrepreneur will be up in arms against such feudal values and practices like *untouchability*.

The famous Telugu novel, *Mala Palli* (1922)⁴ and the first popular Telugu movie, *Mala Pilla* (1938) have mainly reflected on the issue of feudal control over agriculture labour and the ways and means of creating necessary socio-cultural liberating conditions for the Harijans.

In any case, the feudal ideological resource is typified either in traditional intellectual class like Brahmins, or the benefactors of the feudal ideology, the feudal class. It is this


social base of cultural feudalism or the social system which sustains it, is at the core of both literary production and creative arts like cinema.

As we have indicated in the beginning 'colonial capitalism' created differential social and cultural changes in the ryotwari and Zamindari areas. A total contrast to the ryotwari is the Zamindari system, wherein the feudal ideology had its deeper social and cultural presence. In Andhra, the percentage of Zamindari to total agricultural area was 35.1. However, the districts like Chittoor, Godavari, Ganjam, Krishna, Nellore and Visakhapatnam have high concentration of Zamindari tracks ranging from around 34% to 71%. This differential land tenure pattern which is crucial for our later analysis is indicated in the table given below.
### PERCENTAGE OF DIFFERENT LAND TENURES DURING 1920-21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the District</th>
<th>% of Ryotwaris</th>
<th>% of Zamindaris</th>
<th>% of Inamdaris</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ganjam</td>
<td>36.88</td>
<td>55.53</td>
<td>07.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visakhapatnam</td>
<td>12.22</td>
<td>70.95</td>
<td>16.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Godavari</td>
<td>59.55</td>
<td>34.31</td>
<td>05.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kistna</td>
<td>51.25</td>
<td>36.40</td>
<td>12.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guntur</td>
<td>91.41</td>
<td>02.82</td>
<td>05.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nellore</td>
<td>49.57</td>
<td>42.88</td>
<td>07.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agency Division</strong></td>
<td><strong>24.02</strong></td>
<td><strong>73.82</strong></td>
<td><strong>02.16</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurnool</td>
<td>97.46</td>
<td>00.00</td>
<td>02.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellary</td>
<td>96.83</td>
<td>00.00</td>
<td>03.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anantapur</td>
<td>96.94</td>
<td>00.00</td>
<td>03.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuddapah</td>
<td>94.23</td>
<td>00.00</td>
<td>05.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittoor</td>
<td><strong>91.10</strong></td>
<td>03.37</td>
<td>05.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average of Andhra</strong></td>
<td><strong>58.67</strong></td>
<td><strong>35.10</strong></td>
<td><strong>06.23</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


These specific material conditions had a different bearing on the cultural system and social life in Zamindari areas. The central material and cultural problem is between the Zamindar and the cultivating tenants. Like in several literary works, in the movie *Rytu Bidda*, the material and social struggle is centered around the vision of cultivating tenants to transform into peasant proprietors, which may not necessarily involve the total abolition of zamindaris. For the broader Gandhian model of reform envisaged
a radical transformation in the realm of individuals attitude, ideas and cultural practices, without imposing any material deprivation of a particular social group or a class. It is this problematic which sought to be highlighted in Rytu Bidda. We therefore, see not a demand for total abolition of Zamindaris, but removal of rent burden, and some other rather peripheral demands as we will show in the subsequent sections.

(I) Mala Pillai Issue of Untouchability

The issue of untouchability stirred the conscience of the social reformers and the intellectuals since 19th century. Efforts began to be made to bring the Harijans into the mainstream of socio-cultural and political life. Words such as Asprusyulu, Ant arani varu, Nimna j atulu, etc., came to be used as English equivalents of untouchables, outcastes etc. These words refer to those exterior caste groupings that were considered to be outside the Varna System according to the Hindu Smritis and Dharma Sastras. These were referred as Chandalas, Matungas, Plavas, Pulkasa and Antyevasulu in Puranas. They held a low ritual status, whose mere touch was considered to be polluting to the upper Varnas, particularly Brahmins and whose very degraded social and material life severely reinforced the stigma of pollution attached to them. In the legal and administrative terminology of the British

*Nanduri Venkata Krishnamacharyulu, Harijana Samasya (Telugu), Kakinada, 1933, p.5.*
Government, words like scheduled castes and depressed classes, came to be used to refer to the people whose extreme poverty, low ritual status and lack of opportunities invested them with social and civil disability.

In the Telugu speaking areas of the Madras Presidency, the Mala and Madiga were the two major untouchable castes to be classified as depressed class, in 1901 and 1911 census.\(^6\) The Madigas were traditional leather working caste, whereas the Malas were traditional weavers and hereditary servants of village officials and landlords. Madigas, besides their traditional occupation, performed other defiling acts in the capacity of village servants such as removing the dead cattle, sweeping, etc.\(^7\) It was these services and duties performed by these castes that made them "polluting" in the Brahmanical ritual notion of purity and pollution and, therefore, contact with them was considered 'ritually' polluting. It was this ritual notion of purity and pollution which kept them out of human contact for centuries. This seems to be the reason for these castes living separately, on the fringes of the villages, far away from the upper caste residences. But, the social and religious significance of the tasks performed


\(^{7}\) Ibid., p.2.
by these untouchables make them an integral part of the cultural and social continuum.⁸

The late 19th century saw a marked deterioration in the economic conditions of the untouchables. As a result of the British economic policies, many of the traditional occupations of these castes lost their importance and proved to be less remunerative. For instance, the Malas of Krishna and Godavari districts, whose traditional occupation was weaving, found weaving less remunerative due to the competition from Lancashire.⁹ As a result of this, they switched to agricultural occupation where they formed the bulk of field servants. Thus, as has been pointed out by the 1901 census, only one eighth of the population of Madigas and 25% of the Malas, drew their sustenance from their traditional occupations and the rest from agriculture, as field servants.¹⁰ This might have probably resulted in the growing dependence of these castes on the upper castes and at the same time their relegated position in relation to other castes, which had better access to the educational and other

⁸Such tasks as beating the drum at village festivals, acting as messengers and the key role they play in marriages and at funerals, besides their role in agriculture make them a part of the socio-cultural system.


occupational opportunities in the colonial system. Thus, to the ritual impurity was added material deprivation, making it impossible for them to escape the stigma of pollution. Further, it may be added that these material conditions which reflected in their unhygienic and poor life styles were also effectively made use of by the upper caste Hindus to keep them at a distance, both physically and socially. At the bottom of hierarchy, the material deprivation and ritual impurity have reinforced one another.

The notion of 'brotherhood' and Christian emphasis on the abolition of caste distinctions, attracted untouchables to Christianity\(^1\). Conversion to Christianity was really looked upon as the major avenue to escape from the burden of pollution and the practice of untouchability. The Christian population which had been estimated as mere 29,402, in the 1871 census, had reached 400,000 mark by 1921.\(^2\) Besides the desire to escape the stigma of pollution and rise in social status, material considerations also played a major role in motivating conversions. There were tangible benefits to be gained by way of education, medical help and employment opportunities by their entry into the Christianity fold.\(^3\) The fact

\(^1\)Census Report of 1921, as quoted in Bharati, June, 1929, p.71.


\(^3\)Uma Ramaswamy, "Self Identity Among Scheduled Castes: A Study of Andhra," Economic and Political Weekly, 23 November 1974,
that Christian education do not recognise caste distinctions, further added to the popularity of Christianity and Christian missionaries among the untouchables. The Christian missionaries came to be looked upon as champions of the oppressed and liberators from their stigmatised identity.

These Evangelical activities of the Christian missionaries were perceived differently by the other Indians. Once the untouchables, who comprise one sixth of the Hindu population, gets converted to Christianity, it would not only boost the European merchandise in India, but also break the traditional patron-client relationship which was the basis of the supposed unity of the whole nation. This, in turn, was considered an impediment in the way of progressing nationalism among the Hindus. In the words of Duggirala Surya Prakasa Rao, a contemporary nationalist: once having adopted Christianity, a Panchama would try to become an independent land owner. Having joined a religion, which taught self respect, no one would be willing to be servant under others and be regarded as a menial. Hence, the people in whom the nationalist spirit has taken its birth, it would be only an illusion to think that they would accept the help of the followers of other faiths in the struggle for independence.\(^{14}\)

These suspicions were further strengthened by the attempts of the British administration to distinguish untouchables from other Hindus, in 1911 census operations. The nationalist Indians began to regard this as another manifestation of a sinister design on the part of the Imperialist British, to keep alive the numerous divisions, already existing in the Indian society.\textsuperscript{15} Further, the British Indian Government established the principle of equality before law and the lower castes and untouchables were formally given access to law. Thus, they were supposed to have equal access to such public facilities as schools, wells, roads, etc.

The economic changes brought about by the British, such as the development of communications and transport, the beginning of modern industry, the development of commercial agriculture, etc., opened new avenues of employment and of social mobility, not only for the elite, but also for the rural poor. Though, the new professions and occupations, dependent on modern western education, were filled overwhelmingly by the upper caste educated elite, the manpower in the lower end jobs in the administration and the unskilled labour on railways was provided by these untouchables and lower castes. In spite of the fact that they came to occupy the lowest, most degraded and low paid positions in industry as well as in agriculture and administration, the fact that at least some jobs

\textsuperscript{15} J.V.B. Sailaja, Op. Cit., p. 12.
were made available to them, outside the village, provided an opportunity for breaking free from traditional restrictions and bondage imposed on them, in the name of caste. Thus, the missionary activity, the British policies and new avenues of mobility, unequivocally reduced the seclusion of the untouchables from the rest of the population.

All this brought about a realisation on the part of the lational intelligentsia to the need to bring about this left out section of the Indian population into the main stream of the socio-cultural life of the people.\textsuperscript{16} This realisation found expression in making the issue, i.e., the reform of the untouchable conditions, a central issue of the socio-cultural reform movements in the present century\textsuperscript{17}. The main aim of the reform movement was to meet the threat that this alienation of Harijans has posed to the Hindu unity on one hand and on the other hand, to bridge the gap among Hindus by building up confidence among untouchables.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16}The Indian National Congress had adopted a resolution in 1917 urging the people of India, to recognise 'the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed upon the depressed classes.' Refer Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt, "The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period," Economic and Political Weekly, Annual Number, February 1979, p.420.

\textsuperscript{17}M.K. Gandhi, Young India (1924-26), Madras, 1927, p.653.

\textsuperscript{18}A.Murali, "Changing Perceptions and Radicalisation of the National Movement in Andhra (1922-34)," Social Scientist, No.183, August 1988, p.3.
A two way course of action was followed. One was aimed at moulding up the cast Hindu perception of the problem and persuading them to assimilate the untouchables into the Varna fold through inter caste marriages and inter dining. The other was to launch welfare programmes aimed at opening up roads, water resources, temples and other public places, eradicating illiteracy through establishing schools and educational institutions, providing scholarships to Panchama students, etc.¹⁹

In Andhra region, a whole generation of leaders, even before Kandukuri Veeresalingam, took up the issues of reform and worked for the upliftment of the untouchables.²⁰ The first to evolve a systematic programme were the Brahmo Samajists. Prominent Brahmo Samaj leaders, like Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu and Raja of Pithapuram were active in providing education and starting many


²⁰ Leaders like Enugula Veeraswamaiah [1780-1836], a Brahmin and a Dubashee in the Sadr Supreme Court at Madras, left in his travelogue, Kasi Yatra Charitramu, traces of impressions on the contemporary social evils. He levels severe criticism against the practice of untouchability as not being originally sanctioned by the Smritis and attributes the large scale conversions to Christianity to the ill treatment meted out to the lower castes in society. His Kasi Yatra Charitramu was compiled by Komaleswarapuram Srinivasa Veeraswamiah and published in 1838. Vennelacunty Subba Rao [1748-1839], Samineni Muthoonarasimha Naidu, Vembakam Raghavacharyulu, Gajula Lakshminarasu Chetty and Ananta Ramaswamy were some of the others reformers who described untouchability irrational and inhuman, and worked for female education, widow marriage and female education. For details, see V. Ramakrishna, Social Reform, Op.cit., pp.57-58.
hostels and schools for the untouchables\textsuperscript{21}. Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu went further and brought up untouchable girls and got them married to high caste boys. Chilakamarti Lakshminarasimham Pantulu, another prominent writer and Brahmo social reformer, started a school, known as Raja Rama Mohana Roy \textit{Vidyalayamu} (for Harijans) to spread education. He successfully maintained it for quite sometime without going for state assistance and this school considered to be the first of its kind in \textit{Andhra}.\textsuperscript{22} A similar school was established by Vemuri Ramoji Rao in Bandar. In Eluru, the \textit{Adimandhra} Mahasabha and in Peddapalem (Guntur district), Sri Krishnasramam were some of the other schools established during this period. Thus the work of reform was carried out defying the restrictions imposed by traditional caste ridden society.\textsuperscript{23}

The major attempts of the reformers were aimed at changing the perceptions of the caste Hindus: religiously convincing them that the untouchables were an integral part of Hindu society. Hence, from the beginning, the reform programme did not go beyond the traditional Varna ideology, which, according to them, ordained the Hindu society based on the nature of duties, rather than superior and inferior divisions. Further, untouchability had no place in


\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Ibid.}
Hinduism as the Hindu Sastras and scriptures did not suggest the existence of a fifth Varna. The internal reform of Hinduism, therefore should aim at the removal of untouchability, with which the 'moral' and 'original positive character' of Varna dharma is restored within the chatur varna system.

Gandhiji emphasized an internal reform and self purification on the part of the untouchables, it was to make the upper castes realise their folly and duty towards their fellow religionists, their position was that of the children of God - Harijans, where their position was to be retrieved within the framework of caste system.

The numerous literary works produced centered round the problem of untouchability ventilate the changing perceptions of this issue under the circumstances of colonial rule and in relation to the on going nationalist struggle for independence. Novel is one of those literary devices that has become a part of Telugu literature due to the contact with the western literary tradition.

25 This aspect is well brought out by J.V.B. Sailaja, Op.Cit.
27 Mangipudi Venkata Sarma, Nirudha Bharatam, [Telugu poetical work], Rajahmundry, 1927.
inspired by the actualities of the rural life it reveals the uncertainties, ambivalence and contradictions of contemporary attitudes, beliefs and values as no other conventional device does. And hence, in this literary form one can find various levels of reactions to the issues and problems of the day.

The problem of untouchability being one such social problem a number of novels were written from time to time based on this. Of such novels, Tallapragada Suryanarayana Rao's *Helavathi* (1913)\textsuperscript{28}, Unnava Lakshminarayana's *Malapalli or Sanga Vijayamu* (1922)\textsuperscript{29} were reflective of contemporary Andhra society. Helavathi was the first novel written on the issue of untouchability in 1913. Helavathi is the daughter of an untouchable, Veerabaludu, who becomes rich with the money given to him by the Mughal emperor, Humayun, for saving his life during his exile. But, Veerabaludu's material prosperity does not bring him social acceptance in the Hindu social hierarchy. Helavathi desires to move away from the stigmatised existence and, therefore, refuses to accept an untouchable as her partner in life. At the same time, in spite of the material prosperity of her family, no upper caste person comes forward to accept her in

\textsuperscript{28}Tallapragada Suryanarayana, *Helavati* (Telugu), Rajahmundry, 1913.

marriage due to her birth in an untouchable family. Ultimately, conversion of the whole family into Islam brought the family social acceptance and a rise in the social hierarchy, which had been denied to them by Hindu religion and society.

The propagation of Christian religious faith by the Christian missionaries in India was seen as part of the colonial attempts at acculturation, an integral feature of colonial hegemonisation process. And acceptance of it means cultural and ideological subjugation which would strengthen and justify the political conquest of the country. Hence, the movement for the upliftment of the untouchables has emerged as a clear response to this hegemonisation. In its initial stage, the movement was aimed at bringing about a change in the perceptions of the caste Hindus and to persuade them to assimilate the untouchables into their fold.\textsuperscript{30} Such literary works as \textit{Helavathi} and \textit{Matru Mandiram},\textsuperscript{31} emphasis was laid on bringing about social equality among castes rather than creation of radical anti caste feeling. Thus efforts were made to achieve the peaceful co-existence of all castes through the inculcation of the feelings of brotherhood towards untouchables. But no where the Aryan notion of \textit{Chaturvarna} was really

\textsuperscript{30}In the \textit{Helavathi} novel emphasis was on bringing about social equality among castes.

\textsuperscript{31}Venkata Parvateeswara Kavulu, \textit{Matrumandiram} (Telugu novel), Rajahmundry, 1918,
challenged. This is nothing but the cultural hegemonisation of the dominant leadership of the Hindu society.

Added to the intervention in cultural domain was the active intervention of colonial rulers in educational and other regions of public behaviour. The process of cultural change generated by this within the Hindu society not only contributed for the emergence of a dominant consciousness about the colonial rule but also brought to the surface the underneath struggle for power and hegemony within the Hindu social groups. The development of the mass movement phase of the nationalist struggle for political independence by the second decade of the century, necessitated the harmonization of these divisions and to pacify these struggles for power. Thus the issue of untouchability has become an integral part of the political movement for independence.

The widening of social base of the political movement thus has been related to the structure and dynamics of the society and to the interests of various social classes, their opposition as well as coming together. In order to persuade people of the feasibility

32 The characterisation of Sangadasu, the character, as an aware and articulate Harijan in Malapalli is an example.

33 The Hindu Literary Society in Madras was founded in Madras during 1830s. The spread of education and the generation of political consciousness among people were its objectives. For details, see R. Suntharalingam, Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, Tucson, 1974.
and desirability of the political ends, there arose need for the creation of a new socio-cultural atmosphere and the justification of its legitimacy. Here lies the justification of the nationalist approach to the issue of untouchability which was not seen as a part of the original Hindu social system, for this practice is contrary to the original spirit of Hinduism. This untouchability is rather a curse to Hinduism and hence the need to root it out. The result of this is a nationalist programme which treats the existence of the six million untouchables as a symptom of degradation of Hindu society. The reform and upliftment of the untouchables thus is only a means through which the reform of the Hindu society could be achieved. The emancipation of the untouchables therefore is made a moral obligation of the upper castes to save Hinduism from further degradation.

As untouchability, a social institution, is not a part of the original Hindu society, the question of altering the social structure, in order to assimilate the untouchables, did not at all arise. What is required is readjustment of social hierarchy. By uplifting the untouchables to the position on par with the Sudras, the social equilibrium is sought to be achieved.34

34This dimension is very well brought out by J.V.3. Sailaja/Op.Cit.
In spite of the presence of a radical perspective, started gaining currency by the end of second decade of the century, which made religious freedom, social justice and a better economic life as a part of the political consciousness of the untouchables, the national perspective of the issue continued to dominate the movement for the emancipation of untouchables.

Another novel which tried to tackle the problem of untouchability as part of the ongoing Gandhian mass nationalist movements is Malapalli. This was the first novel where the author tried to project the problem of untouchability not merely as a social problem but an economic one rooted in rural India. The author, Unnava Lakshminarayana himself was an active social reformer and a front line nationalist leader in Andhra in 1920s. The novel is a faithful depiction of the contradictions existing in rural Andhra between caste Hindu landlords and the untouchable field labourers and of the socio-political consciousness among the lower castes in 1920s.

It is also the best example of the realisation of the need for total reconstruction of the social system and its economic base and the resulting fusion of the awakened consciousness in both the caste Hindu and the untouchables themselves resulting in uplifting

the Panchamas. Sangadasu on whose name the novel titled Sanga Vijayamu represents the ideological position of the contemporary nationalist intellectuals which is rooted in the bourgeois ideology, and who believed that to avoid the disintegration of the society on the basis of caste and region, it is necessary to uplift the untouchables economically and socially and for this the upper castes have to be brought down to help the untouchables in their endeavours. Thus by mutual cooperation the ever widening gulf could be bridged, [i.e., through consensus].

Malapalli is also the first novel in Telugu written under the influence of socialist ideology, the propagation of which led to the banning of the publication of the novel twice by the British government. Venkatadasu upholds the socialist stream rooted in the communist ideology (impact of 1917 Bolshevik Revolution). This

Srinivasa Siromani, Op.Cit., p.4 02. The central character in Malapalli, novel is Sangadasu, the Harijan leader. He says, "If we ask land to all people do they agree? It is not a justified demand. We only demand a share in the crop. The arid lands, the forest lands should be distributed to depressed classes for which the land lords should say no. Let the rich should strive for the educational advancement of the poor." Unnava Lakshminarayana, Malapalli, Part I, p.181. Also see Atlury Murali, "Changing Perceptions," Op.cit.

Bellamkonda Rama Rao published Malapalli, a novel, written by Unnava Lakshminarayana in 1922 in Vijayawada. The Government of Madras Presidency proscribed it in 1923. A serious debate in the Legislative Council went on. Ayyadevara Kaleswara Rao invited the debate. Though the ban was lifted in 1928, in 1936 ban was reimposed. C.Rajagopalachari, the first Prime Minister of Madras Presidency in 1937, at last, waived the ban order. See Bangore, Malapalli Navalapai Prabhutva Nisheedhalu, Hyderabad, 1979.
character preaches a direct confrontation between the rich and the poor in order to achieve social and economic equality.

Another path shown in the novel for the emancipation of untouchables is through spiritual means. This has been upheld by Ramadasu in the novel. He believed that the untouchables can attain a higher social standing by keeping their inner and outer selves pure and through devotion to God. This shows the Gandhian ideological influence, which aims at removing the curse of untouchability from the Indian society through internal and self purification from the lowest rungs of the social system a reform which would prove the spiritual richness of the lower castes over, the caste Hindus. This establishes the firm faith of untouchables in Hindu religion.

In this novel the problem of untouchable Malas and Madigas is identified with not only the social relations but also with production relations in agriculture. The main issue is conversion of coolie wages into money as against the practice of paying in kind, which is the usual mode of paying and is the accepted practice for centuries in India and the reaction of the coolies to this change.

In Malapalli, untouchability issue is not understood in the sense of a mere socio-cultural readjustment which would solve the
problem amicably. But as an issue which is related to the reconstruction of the entire Hindu society with a changing world view.

Like a typical nationalist leader of the time, Unnava the author, favoured a change in the social relations of production at such a level that it would not disturb the existing relations of production but put the country on the path of bourgeois social development. This is evident in his approach to the issue of coolie wages. Supporting the coolies demand for a higher wage, he provides justification for the demand saying that "Labour is the property of the coolies and land is the ryots property. Each should have its own rate. When the ryot is getting a higher price for his commodity land, should not there be a relative increase in the price of the coolies commodity - labour?\textsuperscript{38}

The issue of untouchability is a socio-religious problem rooted in \textit{Varnasramadharma}. The struggle against the practice of untouchability was linked with the political struggle for the emancipation of the country from foreign rule. The struggle for national liberation, in other words, necessitated the socio-cultural remodelling of the traditional society, by solving the internal social and cultural contradictions. Harmonizing the social

divisions in order to strengthen the Hindu society was the main concern of the nationalist intelligentsia. It was this context which gave a politico-economic direction to the issue of untouchability besides the socio-religious angle. By the second decade of the present century, these changing concerns and perceptions got reflected in Telugu literary production.39

The literary production from the beginning therefore, remained to be a powerful source for the creation and propagation of ideologies and ideological struggles in the early 20th century Andhra. Naturally, the intellectual perceptions as refracted in literature and the broader ideological struggles, also reflected in the newly emerged mass medium, cinema.

39The best examples are Tallapragada Suryanarayana, Helavati; Venkata Parvateeswara Kavulu, Matrumandiram and Unnava Laskshminarayana, Malapalli. For details on other works, see Nallapati Sivanaraiah, et.al. [Compiled], Telugu Sahitya Kosamu: Adhunika Sahityamu (1851-1950), [Telugu], Hyderabad, 1986.
**Kala Pilla (An Untouchable Girl):**

Gudavalli Ramabrahman's *Mala Pilla*, as the name suggests is the story of a Harijan girl. This film touches upon the burning social evil untouchability, upliftment of Harijans, fundamentalism of orthodox people, social oppression of upper caste Hindus, social reform activities of Harijan Seva Sangh are the other issues that are prominently figured in this film. However, the central theme is inter caste marriage. With the entry of Harijans into a temple the film came to a happy end. This film was produced under the influence of Gandhian ideology. Mahatma's objective was made known to the people through this powerful medium and gave tremendous moral boost to the vast multitude of Harijans.

**Theme:** *Mala* Pilla is so natural a cinema, one will feel as if it is relevant even today. The historical space is pre-independent India. The theme is adaptable to any or for that matter every village of India. There is no bar of time. The inter caste marriage is the theme applicable to our times too i.e. contemporary. Untouchability is a crime constitutionally. By making it a constitutional obligation can we eradicate untouchability? How many of us are prepared to bring social equality through inter caste marriages? Facing social problems through this event is not new, of course problems may be different from what the hero of this film faced. Nativity in Mala Pilla is heart touching. The cinema starts with a cocks call to rural
people who start their daily work no sooner than the call of a cock from upon a thatched hut, is given. In Telugu cinemas the other traditional way of indicating the dawn of a day is to show the rising sun.

In this film the internal contradictions are better portrayed. The socio-economic relations between the landlord and agricultural labour are more strong than between the priestly class and the working class. When the land labour launched a strike the landed class is more affected. As agricultural operations depend more on nature, they cannot be postponed and this was the reason why landed ryots joined Harijan labourers against the will of priestly members in the village. Likewise, liberal political outlook is seen in this film. Issue of class identity and class relations are depicted in this film. Initially, all the village dwellers were one against the Harijans of the same village in enforcing restriction of fetching drinking water from the village tank. Mala Pilla is a powerful social cinema.

In Mala Pilla, Gandhian ideology is predominantly used. Evidence of a specific form of visual address tells us about the particular effects of cinema on society; and also about the means by which it persuades an audience of the legitimacy of a certain ideological position.
The character of Chowdary is created to propagate Gandhiji's Harijan Seva. More women are members of this Harijan Seva Sangh. Radhabayamma is Chairperson of the Sangh. Khadi clothes, wearing of Gandhian cap, spinning of cotton are all the images of congress party. The photos of national leaders along with Andhra leaders are prominently shown. There is one song praising Gandhiji: 'Kollai Gattitenemi .... maa Gandhi.'40

During Sivarathri day congress volunteers collected sums for 'Harijan Fund' roaming around with Hundies. At one point when the Harijans enmasse attempted forcible entry into the temple, Chowdary adopted Gandhian technique of Satyagraptha. He demanded while lying on the floor along with volunteers to walk over them if they wanted to enter the temple. This is one way of persuasion. Chowdary after giving advise to go on strike insisted a word from Harijans not to use force. 'The strike should be purely non-violent', he demanded. Gandhiji's temperance movement is also used by the director Ramabrahmam, in this film. The lady volunteers picketed toddy shops and appealed not to consume toddy. One man in the intoxicant mood hit one lady volunteer with stone making her

"Lyricist of this song was Basavaraju Appa Rao, a popular Telugu romantic poet of the contemporary period. In total Basavaraju Appa Rao wrote 10 national songs. "Swarajya Lakshmi Pendli," "Jatiya Patakamu," "Venunadam," "Bapuji ma boss," etc were to name a few. See Basavaraju Appa Rao, Basavaxaju Appa Rao Gitalu, Hyderabad, 1991. Also see Paidipala, Telugu Cinema Pata, Madras, 1992, p.219."
unconscious. **Chowdary** then sings a song disclosing the evils of liquor.

Chowdary throughout the film strove hard for the upliftment of Harijans. He championed the cause of social equality. He vehemently stood for the cause of temple entry to Harijans. He reads a news item from newspaper about the temple entry of Harijans in the native state of Indore. When Muneyya, a Harijan saves the life out of fire of hero's mother, Chowdary points out that there are good people in Harijans also. "**Character** counts but not *caste*", says Chowdary. In the film **Desodharaka Kasinathuni Nageswara Rao Pantulu**'s photo is extensively used along with the photos of other national leaders. In fact Ramabrahmam dedicated this film to the memory of Nageswara Rao Pantulu *Garu*.41

Thus **Mala Pilla** was used for motivation for instruction, for purposiveness and for social engineering under the influence of Gandhian ideology. Agricultural workers' solidarity is given a special treatment in this film. There is one song enunciating unity of workers: "**Koolivarandaru Ekam Kavalera**". Crushing of

41Desodharaka Kasinathuni Nageswara Rao Pantulu was a veteran freedom fighter of Andhra. The director Ramabrahmam, himself being sympathiser of Congress, expressed his gratitude towards Nageswara Rao Pantulu by dedicating the film to him, as shown in the starting of the film. Desodharaka was the founder of **Andhra Patrika** and **Bharathi**. In fact, he was one of the two nationalists who took to business [Amritanjan Company], the other being **Dr.Bhogaraju**.
sugar cane, manufacture of jaggery, plantains, mustard oil crop are picturised impressively. During labour strike coolies from neighbouring villages were persuaded not to accept work even if they were offered attractive remuneration. All of them accepted to the demand of the striking labour and expressed their solidarity. Another specific feature of the film is Kamma land owners rejected the orders of Brahmins, When their own economic interest was at stake. They stood by the side of Harijans.

Evidence of a specific form of visual address tells us about the particular effects of the cinema on society; and also about the means by which it persuades an audience of the legitimacy of a certain ideological position. On the whole, in Mala Pilla the underlying point is about social reform. The film is silent about the ruling class, its colonial character and finally about its overthrow. But the party which is striving for its overthrow is thoroughly dealt with. Gandhian ideology is made pretty clear.

The oppression of caste Hindus was so dominant that they could not tolerate even a Harijan goes under an umbrella in a hot sunny day. He was scolded Mala Vedahva 'idiotic Harijan.' The caste Hindu members ascribed this to the influence of Harijan Seva Sangh. Similarly, when the Harijans came for a compromise to the house of Sastri, they were forced to stand in the open soaking under downpour. Sastri denied them entry, even into the verandah of his
house and what is pathetic is he says let them remain in rain so that they are rid of some dirt. The hero's father is very orthodox type Brahmin. When he receives a letter from his son he simply tears it off and washes his hands. He feels he is sinned by touching a letter of Varna sankara, as his mingles freely with other caste members and marries a Harijan girl.

Hindu society is caste ridden. Varnasrama dharma continues from times immemorial. Members of the four varnas worship pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses. But the peculiar feature of Hindu religion is Sudras are barred from religious rites and rituals. Harijans are treated untouchables. Mere bodily contact pollutes the upper caste Hindus - is the feeling. But this social ill treatment does not deter their faith on Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Karma theory is all pervasive. Even today it is the order of the day. On the walls of the hut of Harijan Muneyya Sri Ram is written. Muneyya's daughters worship Lord Krishna. Muneyya pleads the Harijan youth not to ridicule God with -he anger over Brahmins. Most of the Harijans took self pity in the name of karma. Muneyya's younger daughter's worship of Krishna is under the influence of Vaishnavite Bhakti cult. During later medieval times Brahmanayudu, a Vaishnavite, opened temples for Harijans and mass dining was also allowed by him. Sastri, a protagonist lectures the

“Roghair, Gene H, The Epic of Palnadu: A Study and Translation of Palnati Virula Katha, A Telugu oral Tradition From Andhra
greatness of Hinduism to his son Nagaraju, the hero. On another occasion, he warns Chowdary that Hinduism is getting ruined. Animal sacrifice is common during Jataras celebrated around local Goddesses in rural areas. When Chowdary pleads against sacrifice of sheep, the Harijans pose the question: ‘you are anyway not giving us entry to temples why also stop worship of our local goddess as per our custom? During the Jatara of Poleramma, the village deity, the Harijans consume toddy and meat. This is the practice of the downtrodden rural people even today.

The hero of Mala Pilla is a highly educated Brahmin, Nagaraju. By defying orthodox father he marries an untouchable girl. He is progressive minded young man who is very zealous about social reform. The hero’s costume is an imitation of national leaders. On the disclosure of his identity to the heroine she utters betrayal. Afterwards hero undergoes introspection. The image of his mind advises him to marry Sampalata, the heroine. Then he remembers about her caste. Suddenly he listens a song from Chowdary and party: "are not the Harijans human beings!" (Malalu matram manushulu kara!) Then once for all he decides to marry Sampalata. This type of introspection of the hero is part of Gandhian methods.

Pradesh, India, New Delhi, 1982, p.10.

"Lyrics of this was provided by Basavaraju Appa Rao referred to earlier."
The most frequent images of women in Telugu cinemas are sacrificing and persevering wife. The heroine of *Mala Pilla* is a Harijan girl Sampalata. The heroine's song attracts him to her. When the hero touches Sampalata she reveals her low social status. She is very conscious about her degraded position and fears about the upper social position of the hero. Hero encourages her and makes her sing a duet. But when once heroine comes to know that Nagaraju was the son of Sastri, the priest, she accused him of betraying her. But she was unable to forget him. Later on hero sought excuse. Her anger subsides and love starts blossoming further. She tries to meet hero which alerted Muneyyya, her father. Muneyyya throws her out of house. After some ordeal, hero and heroine escape to Calcutta. Hero gets employment. Heroine learns English and becomes modern. All is well at last. Their love got the approval of parents.

Hero's mother, on looking the grief of hero for heroine, tries to solve the problem in an ingenious way. She was not prepared to accept a Harijan Giri as her daughter-in-law and at the same time she cannot see her darling son in so pathetic a mood. She advises her son to have illicit relation with Sampalata. In patriarchy the hegemony of male desires and aspirations operates supreme. For the hero's mother it does not seem wrong if a male member has illicit relationship with another lady. Women are so hegemonised in Indian society that they at times go against the interests of their own
gender. The mothers of both hero and heroine could not go against their authoritative husbands and ultimately succumbed to grief.

Coincidence in narrative device that has always been a favorite of melodrama. In Mala *Pilla* the director adopts this technique of melodrama. In Calcutta the man who does the accident comes to the rescue of unemployed *Nagaraju* and offers a job. This gave the needed security for the runaway three members - hero, heroine and her sister. Meanwhile situation in the village also changes. Heros house caught fire, heroines father rescues the life of hero's mother and thereby transformation of Sastri takes place. Thus car accident and fire accidents are used as melodrama.

Liberal democracy is envisaged in dialogues. The same spirit is evident in the short stories of *Sripada Subramanya Sastry*, Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry, and other creative writers, like Chilakamarthi, Garimella, Damaraju Pundarikashudu, etc., of the period. Dialogues in Mala Pilla are very harsh regarding social matters and critical concerning religion. Extreme devotion is expressed towards patriotism. Worship of *Gandhiji* is the underlying phenomenon in dialogues. Social reform is the objective.

"V. Ramakrishna, "Literary and Theatre Movements in Colonial Andhra: Struggle for Left Ideological Legitimacy," in *Social Scientist*, Numbers: 23 6-37, Vol.21, p72."
of the cinema and as such dialogues have the flavour of reformation zeal. Tapi Dhanna Rao Naidu's pen has shown a new taste.  

The romanticism of 1930s is reflected in the songs of Mala Pilla. The current political situations are well utilised. The following song is prevalent on the lips of everybody in every nook and corner of Andhra of the period:

Kollai Gattitenemi........ mâ Gandhi  
(Our Gandhi........ what if he wears country made short cloths)

Komatai Puttitenemi...  
(what if born in Vaisya family)
Vennapoosa manasu Kannatalli prema...  
(Cream like heat showers the love of mother)

Pandanti momu pai brahma tejassu  
( Glory of God facially)

*Nalgu* parakala pilaka *natyamade* pilaka  
(scant hair dances on head)

*Nalguvedala* Nanyamerigina pilaka  
(the scant hair knows quality of Vedas)  

*Bosinorippite* Mutyala Tolakare  
(Shower of pearls if opens mouth)

Chirunawu *navvite* varahala varshame  
(drizzle of rain through smiles)  

Chaka Chaka Nadistenu Jagati *Kampinchenu*  
(Brisk walk tolls earth)

Paluku Palikutenu Brahma Vakkenu  
(A word from his mouth is word of Brahma)

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45Screen adaptation of *Mala Pilla* cinema was done by Tapi Dharma Rao Naidu.
"Kollaigattitenemi maa Gandhi ...." is a special political song. Congress ideology is well depicted in songs of the period. Basavaraaju Appa Rao's songs awoke the slumbering people of Andhra and instilled a new spirit of nationalism. *Nallavade Golla Pilla Vade....' was a super hit song. 'Vadakave Vadakave Ratnama', 'Maalalu matram manujulu kaara,' etc., songs stirred up whole of Andhra.46

Mala Pilla proved the power of mass medium, cinema. It was a tremendous box office hit movie. It broke all time records of collections. It was for the first time Mala Pilla released in 12 centers simultaneously. No other picture before was released in so many centers at a time. It was for the first time the songs of a social film spread every nook and corner of Andhra. Nallavade Golla Pillavade was a rage. The songs were with a touch of folklore tunes and hence were very easy to remain on the lips of illiterate rural folk. In the words of eminent music director Pendyala Nageswara Rao: "Bhimavarapu Narasimha Rao, the music director of Mala Pilla for the first time modernised cine music."47 "Between the verses of the song BNR gave link music a practice unknown previously", said Adinarayana Rao another noted music

"All the above songs were penned by Basavaraju Appa Rao.

Maddipatla Suri, a reputed dialogue writer for most of
the Prabhakara Reddy's movies said, "Mala Pilla's impact is
astounding." After viewing Mala Pilla the Travancore Raja
facilitated the opportunity of temple entry to Harijans in his
native state. Is it not the positive contribution of the film Mala
Pilla?" As a token of appreciation Mala Pilla was dedicated to
the Raja of Travancore.

Besides the usual love story of a high caste Brahmin boy
falling in love with an untouchable girl, the picture Mala Pilla
projected the agricultural labour problem and the need for an
organised Kisan movement. There was a militant strike song with a
refrain that all the coolies should unite. The film was an instant
success.

Nagaraju is the hero of Mala Pilla. It is strange thing that
hero never bothers nor shows any inclination towards the social
conflict between Harijans and the orthodox Brahmins. The social
tension was restricted to Brahmins and Harijans. What about the

48 Adinarayana Rao, "Evolution of Film Music," Vijayachitra,
(Telugu), (Annual Number), Madras, 1967.

49 Interview with Maddipatla Suri, Madras, 27.6.1994.

50 Ibid.

51 From an article by Arudra, "Two Decades of Telugu Cinema,"
remaining village dwellers of other castes, what was their attitude towards Harijans was not shown except during strike period. There was no mention about the village officers of Kalyanapuram. The love of Nagaraju and Sampalata was viewed as sensual pleasure (kamamu) only by the nameless critic. He never approves the pre-marital moving of Nagaraju and Sampalata—either at Kalyanapuram or at Calcutta. This picture rather envisages the forthcoming social revolution than depicting the contemporary social situation. That is why it is far from reality.\textsuperscript{52}

'Social Reform or Social Antagonism?'—Criticism on Mala Pilla by Pandrangi Kesava Rao\textsuperscript{53} Mala Pilla stirs of social antagonism. Harijans were oppressed not by Brahmins only. This picture blames only Brahmins. A Brahman conference was held in Bezawada and urged the Government to take suitable action against Mala Pilla. This was produced to insult one Brahmin priest. In the film Chowdary was shown a reformer which is untrue. Real reformers in Andhra were all Brahmins, look for instance, Veeresalingam, Guduru Ramachandrudu, etc. In fact the writer of this film Chalam is no other than Brahmin. The man who champions for the cause of temple entry of Harijans—C. Rajagopala Chari. Who is he? So to give credit to Chowdary or Gandhi is not

\textsuperscript{52}Andhra Patrika, 16 September 1938.

\textsuperscript{53}Andhra Patrika, 30 September 1938.
i justified. Rama Brahman should have invented a story - marrying Harijan girl by a Kamma. Eradication of caste cannot be done by films of this type. It cannot be achieved by Gandhi or Congress. A Kabir or a Ramanujacharya or a Ramadas or a Namadev has to be reborn. Even I too wish castelessness. But how?

The above criticism seems totally biased and it is nothing but a tirade against Gudavalli Ramabrahmam. In his scathing attack, the critic goes to an extent of belittling Gandhiji's ideology. The Brahmin organisation met in Bezawada on 27 September 1938 and demanded for a review of Mala Pilla by an impartial committee. If the objectionable parts are not removed within one week, the organisation threatened to go on Satyagraha. A resolution was unanimously moved to this effect.\(^5^4\)

Another critic Gopala Raju Brahmanandam\(^5^5\) also criticizes Ramabrahmam. The director of the film with mean mentality throws mud on Brahmin Sangha. The veterans like Kandukuri, Kasinathuni, Suduru, Unnava, Ayyadevara, Konda, Gollapudi and Nallpati were all from Brahmin community. Ramabrahmam created a character Chowdary tfho cannot be compared to even with anyone of the above mentioned stalwarts. In any village in Andhra Harijans conflict with Kammas

\(^{5^4}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{5^5}\text{Ibid.}\)
and other non Brahmins but not with Brahmins is a universal fact.
The events mentioned in Malapalli did not happen, are now happening and will not happen in Andhra. Earning money in the name of Gandhiji is accusable.

Along with brickbats Mala Pilla received bouquets too. Guntur Harijan Seva Sangh met in Satyanarayana Talkies of Tenali at 8.00 A.M on 26th September 1938 and presented a felicitation paper to Ramabrahmam. While garlanding Ramabrahmam and Dr. Govinda Rajula, President of the meeting was veteran Congress man Muddula Giri Rao. The members of the Harijan Sangh were extremely happy. They desired their vows will be over within short time.57

Maganti Bapineedu : Public Information Parliamentary Secretary
P. Sambanda Mudaliar : Retired Judge
V.I. Munuswamy : Agricultural Minister
Pillai
J.S. Shanmugam Pillai (MLA) : First Harijan Mayor of Madras
Tenneti Viswanathanam (MLA) : Revenue, Parliamentary Secretary
Atiyapati Narayana Murthy : Editor, Prabhatam

were all in praise of Mala Pilla.58

56 Ibid., p.2.
57 Ibid., 2 October 1938. In this issue, another resolution for a ban on Mala Pilla was published, sent by Brahmin Association of Kakinada.
58 Ibid., p.2.; Andhra Patrika, 2 October 1938.
A Bombay Talkies film **Achhut Kanya** (untouchable girl) made in Hindi in 1936 was the best of Devika Rani films. Ashok Kumar was hero. Caste barriers stand in the way of lovers. Unlike in **Mala Pilla**, in *Achhut Kanya* the untouchable girl sacrifices her life at the altar of bigotry.\(^59\) When compared, these two films with the same theme, *Mala Pilla* is far superior. G. Ramabrahmanam provided a positive solution to the problem. After all life is not to end abruptly.

(ii) **RYTU BIDDA: Congress and Peasant Politics in Andhra, the Ministry Experiment Period, 1937-39**

The Indian National Congress passed a resolution on the fundamental rights and economic programme in its Karachi Session in 1931.\(^60\) On economic front, the resolution said that the organisation of economic life must confirm to the principle of justice to the end, that it may secure decent standard of living and the state shall safeguard the interests of industrial workers, labour to be freed from serfdom. With regard to agrarian sector it advocated that the peasants and workers shall have the right to form unions to protect their interests. The system of land tenure, revenue and rent shall be reformed, and equitable adjustment made of the burden on


\(^{60}\)History of Freedom Struggle, File No.931., Andhra Pradesh State Archives, Hyderabad.
agricultural land; **immediate** relief to the smaller peasantry, by way of substantial reduction in the existing agricultural rent and revenue payments and in case of uneconomic holdings a complete exemption from rent, and with such relief as may be just and necessary to holders of small estates affected by such in exemption in rent.\(^6^1\) This proposed reform programme did not however, satisfy the left wing. The congress socialist party which met for the first time in Bombay on 21st October 1934, prepared a much more radical socio-economic programme.\(^6^2\) Its objections included the elimination of princes Zamindars, and landlords without compensation and redistribution of land to the cultivating peasants, encouragement of cooperative and collective farming by the state, and complete exemption from rents and taxes of all peasants with uneconomic holdings.\(^6^3\)

But both these attempts did not materialise and they appeared much as high sounding words. However, the peasantry as a whole identified themselves with the congress and their struggle for independence. What is the reason for this?


\(^6^2\)Ibid.,

N.G. Ranga, a well known peasant leader points out that the congress deliberately avoided transforming the spontaneous types of class struggles against local exploiting classes into more organised and politically linking them with other exploited strata on a national scale which could have made the anti imperialist struggle more broad based, militant and revolutionary.\textsuperscript{64} The non cooperation movement was a watershed in the History of peasant movement in Andhra, since it revealed the congress strategy of involving the peasantry in the anti imperialist movement. However, but, with the passage of time the congress never permitted the peasant movement to go beyond reform pressure for economic relief or a movement for political bargaining with British rulers.\textsuperscript{65} In 1923, Ranga goes on to argue that when the first, conscious attempts were made in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, some leaders tried to discourage them on the plea that the congress organisation itself was a mass organisation working for the basic rights and needs of peasants. However, in their daily struggle with the public works and revenue departments, the peasants never received help from the congress committees. The Godavari, Krishna and Guntur, Kurnool resettlements, the Rayalaseema and Ganjam


famines had to be fought mostly by peasant organisations independently, since the official congress leadership had failed to stand by the peasants. There cannot be a more glaring failure of the congress to lead the peasants than its cold shouldering of the Andhra Zamindari ryot movement. In this context, being a contemporary peasant leader N.G. Ranga had stressed the need for the development of an independent, class consciousness and self reliant movement. All India organisation with a network of organisations all over the country which found favour with the peasants in all the provinces. Moreover, the peasants knew, as a fact, the British imperialism with all its variegated facets cannot be fully overcome unless its most important Indian allies, the Mahajans and Zamindars, were completely prevented from carrying on their ceaseless class warfare against the masses. So far as the Indian National Congress was the only effective political body with a countrywide organisation which claimed to champion the cause of the masses, it should have most necessarily worked to offer the solutions to the problems of the peasantry and made it the chief plank of its political and economic programmes. If such political support was not forth coming, the peasants, if they were to save themselves from utter ruin, had no option but to fight independently to secure their rights. It was in the context of the


"N.G.Ranga, _The Modern Indian Peasant_, Delhi, 1979, pp.19-28.
above dilemma that the contemporary peasant leaders like N.G. Ranga sought to merge the struggle of the peasantry into the fight for Swaraj. In this sense that the Kisan and political movements have become interdependent, the strength of the one adding to that of the other. Ranga further stresses that the congress must also strive for the removal of all those obstacles that stood in the way of the true and lasting solution conducive to the fullest well being of the agricultural masses of the country. thus the peasants fight for bread and land have to be linked up with the national fight for political freedom.\(^6\)

After the withdrawal of civil disobedience movement, the most important event was elections conducted to the provincial legislature, in 1937. The significant outcome of the election of 1937 was the sweeping success of the Congress. C. Raja Gopalachari formed his ministry. T. Prakasam was given the Revenue department.

Under Zamindari tenurial system the perpetual right in land was given to the Zamindari with a permanently fixed government land revenue demand, while the Ryotwaris, the peasant proprietorship in land was established with a provision to review the land revenue demand after every 30 years. With each resettlement the tax burden on the agriculturists increased several fold in the Ryotwaris and

the main demand that emerged out of this context was the permanent fixation of land revenue demand by the government. The Zamindari agrarian structure in Andhra evolved under the impact of permanent settlement enabled landlords to appropriate a large share of the agricultural produce. The important mode of surplus extraction was rent both in kind and cash. But there was no uniformity with regard to the methods and rates of rent and they varied from estate to estate. The enhancement of revenue demand after resettlement operations in 1920s was 25% in Divi delta, 29% in Godavari, 36% in Divi and Krishna uplands and the implementation of which resulted in the increased indebtedness of cultivators.69 The peasants in Andhra complained to the Prakasam Committee, in 1938, that "the Zamindars pushed the rents high up against all the principles of the permanent settlement under the threat of evicting them."70 It has been pointed out that in the Zamindari areas, the rents bear no relation either to the nature of soil or the conditions of the peasantry when compared with neighbouring government rates of similar soils and they are at least thrice higher and in some cases up to four or five times.71 Therefore, rack renting led to friction between landlords and tenants. Various struggles were launched,


71. Ibid., p.605.
including legal battles by the peasantry against the rent enhancements. The peasants in Bobbili, Mandasa, Parlakimidi and Pithapur estates launched a vigorous agitation against rack renting. The Zamindaris in Andhra were also harsh in terms of collecting rents. Very often estate officials resorted to physical assault, torture, punishments and other illegal methods to collect rents. The Zamindars in Andhra never granted rent remissions at the time of calamities and disturbances. It has also been said that in many estates granting of remission was used as a weapon for political considerations. The refusal to comply with peasants demand inevitably accentuated antagonism between landlords and tenants. But threat of eviction and lack of collective strength always forced the tenantry into submission. Exorbitant rents proved quite burdensome to the peasants during the world economic depression. In a number of estates the Zamindars resorted to litigation both to realise rents and to subjugate the peasantry. In Vizianagaram and Bobbili estates, for instance, the number of

72 G. Parthasarathy, Peasant organisations and movements in Andhra Pradesh, Waltair, 1979, p.81.


74 G.O.No. 353, Public ., dated 28 February, 1935, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Madras. In the Venkatagiri, Bobbili and Vizianagaram Estates, the ryots are paying (a kist of) Rupees 35,45,85 per acre. But the maximum assessment on Government lands is Rs.12, according to the Joint Parliamentary Committee Report, 2 February 1934.
rent suits increased by 70% between 1931 and 1936. In the Andhra districts as a whole, the rent suits were nearly doubled, i.e., from 12,481 in 1927 to 24,743 in 1935.

Having inspired by the nationalist movement during the 1930s, the peasants of Munagala estate formed their own association, the Munagala Rytu Sangham, to fight against the tyranny of the Zamindar. So also the ryots of Nellore district had started their own Sanghams to resist feudal exploitation and oppression.

The Andhra Pradesh Zamin Rytu Association under the inspiring leadership of N.G. Ranga and other radical nationalists took active part in conducting economic enquiries and highlighting the pathetic conditions of Zamindari ryots in many estates. Several anti-landlord struggles were launched in the estates like Venkatagiri, Munagala, Challapalli, Mandasa Kalipatnam. The most prominent struggle among them was Venkatagiri Satyagraha 1931-32 which was organised to protest against the principles of leasing Kanchas (grazing lands) at exorbitant rates. N.G. Ranga organised a large

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76 Reports on the working of the Madras Estate Land Act of 1908 for the years 1928-1935.

77 N.G. Ranga, Revolutionary Peasant, New Delhi, 1949, p. 79.


79 Zamin Rytu Patrika, 5 September 1932.
number of peasant marches and peasant weeks during 1937-39. The basic demands were - (I) the judicious interests of the ryots in relation to land holders (ii) collection and remission of rent (iii) survey, record of rights (including water rights) (iv) levies from ryots in addition to rent (v) utilization of local natural facilities by tenants for their domestic and agricultural purposes and maintenance of irrigational works (vi) the complete abolition of Zamindari system (vii) reduction of rentals and 50% reduction in land taxes. N.G.Ranga was the President of the Peasants Protection Committee with head office at Bezwada and Gottipati Brahmayya and N.Veera Raghavayya as Joint Secretaries. Ranga was said to have organised more than six peasant marches to the Collectors' offices. Meetings were held at villages en route and attracted considerable attention of the people. In this connection the Andhra peasants march is worth mentioning. A number of speeches were delivered by N.G. Ranga at Ellore, Nuzvid, Tenali, Appikatla, Govada, Edupugallu, etc. On 3 July 1937, the Andhra peasant marchers began their historic march from Itchapuram under the leadership of Kommareddy Satyanarayana Murthy, President of Andhra Provincial Ryots Association and reached Madras with 800 Petitions. The

7G.Parthasarathi, Peasants Organizations and Movements in Andhra Pradesh, Waltair, 1979, p.81.


8Ibid.

82G.O. Ms. No. 2276, Public (Gen), 26 November 1937.
success of the congress in 1937 elections raised hopes and expectations of the peasantry in so far as the congress role in the legislatures was concerned. But the ministry did not do much. Reduction in revenue and rent demands were not fulfilled. The problem of rural indebtedness remained as chronic as before. However, the work of the Madras Estate Land Act Committee, popularly known as the Prakasam Committee was monumental with regard to the history of Zamindari system and the revenue administration in the Madras Presidency.\(^83\) The Zamindars opposed the recommendations of the committee.\(^84\) the Zamindar of Mirzapuram criticized the report as unjust and ineritable to Zamindars. Violent disputes between peasants and Zamindars over the issue of rents occurred in Kalipatnam and Munagala estates in Andhra. The negative attitude of the congress ministry towards the anti-zamindar struggles disappointed the peasantry. Adding insult to injury the congress leadership opposed and suppressed the anti-zamindari struggles in the name of non-violence and law and order. It protected the land lords by watering down the growing peasant militancy. This was In spite of the peasants mass support which enabled the congress to occupy seats of power in the government, defeating the Raja's of Bobbili, Pithapur and Venkatagiri.

\(^{83}\)Report of Madras Estate Land Act Committee, Memoranda Supplementary pt.II.

\(^{84}\)The Mail, in Native Newspaper Reports, Madras Presidency, 1 February 1939, HFS, AP, Hyderabad.
Despite failures, the Zamin ryot movement in Andhra was an organised movement right from its inception. It was not like the movements in Malabar and Pabna where after a series of violent outbursts, the peasant movement was channelized into a constitutional struggle. In Andhra, the Andhra Pradesh Zamin Rytu Sangham had systematically organised the peasant movement through Satyagraha, annual conferences, marches and so on.  

It's against this backdrop one should understand the picture of Rytu Bidda.

In the History of Telugu films, perhaps no other film, till date, has generated so much attention as Rytu Bidda did. The creativity of G. Ramabrahmam, the director, is simply superb. Creativity regarding cinemas means generation of ideas, themes and thoughts for films and then the translation of these ideas, themes and thoughts on the celluloid. All creativity is a result of some compulsion may be inner or outer. A beautiful sunrise, a moving note of music, a touching personal tragedy is a compulsion which stirs the artist and creation becomes inevitable. Struggle for political, economic and spiritual emancipation is compulsion strong enough to inspire him.  

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86 K.A. Abbas, "What the Talkies Talked About?" in T.M. Ramachandran [ed.], *50 Years of Indian Talkies [1931-1981]*, Bombay,
there was some awakening in those days of Andhra. Unnava Lakshminarayana’s Malapalli and Sri Sri’s poems spread Marxist ideology among the people.\textsuperscript{87} The Communist Party in Andhra was in formative stage. From Karachi Session (1930) onwards Congress party showed more leanings towards land reforms.\textsuperscript{88} Along with Indian National Congress Sessions in 1936 at Lucknow, All India Kisan Conference was also held. Swamy Sahajananda as President, N.G. Ranga as Secretary got elected. The then President of Indian National Congress, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru accepted Ryots’ demands. Nehru gave a message thus: “Workers, peasants and agricultural labour need complete socio-economic freedom where there will be no exploitation of any kind.” With their participation in freedom struggle they will realise their political rights.”\textsuperscript{89} In 1937 elections congress party emerged victorious in composite Madras State. All the ryots who were paying land revenue had voting right and all of them were instrumental in the victory of congress party. The Justice Party dominated by Zamindars fared badly in this election. But subsequent history is not favourable to ryots. The


\textsuperscript{87}Sri Sri, \textit{Mahaprasthanam}, [Telugu], Vijayawada, 1954.


\textsuperscript{89}Mukkamala Nagabhushanam, ”Impact of Marxism on Ryot labour movements of Andhra Pradesh,” in C. Narasimha Rao [ed.], \textit{Telugu Sankranthi –Marxism Prabhavam} (Telugu), Vijayawada, 1992., p.124.
Congress ministries failed to fulfil Nehru's message. Then the ryot protection league under the leadership of Kommareddy Satyanarayana Murty and Chalasani Vasudeva Rao launched long march on 1937 July 3 from Itchapuram. On 27 March 1938 it reached Madras. The league received many a petition from ryots and agricultural labour and submitted them to the ministry. As a result Prakasam Committee was constituted. But nothing significant turned out later.

Against this background, Gudavalli Ramabrahmam chose to produce *Rytu Bidda's* theme. The cinema, *Rytu Bidda's* production time was late 1930s. The contradiction between ruling classes and the ruled was dominant then. One of the main functions of the ruling class, then, in addition to ensuring the economic organisation and political power of their class was to preserve the hegemony of their class over a society as a whole, by means of a justifying ideology. In any time ruling class creates the cultural atmosphere which serves its vested interests and try to present it as the ideology. In class society music, literature and all other art forms are created in this frame work only. However, on the other hand, there would be an alternative peoples culture. However, the cultural values and ideology which get the official propaganda and patronage, will that only continue to be dominant,

The Telugu cinemas of the earlier times represented the culture of the ruled. The mythologicals, the historicals and the social films did not in any way conflict with the ruling interests. All these cinematic themes were useful for the emerging new class from ruled which was going to be a part of the ruling class. The creators of 1938 cinemas were no other than that class which got a share in 1937 government. They inaugurated social films with reform zeal. Hitherto cinemas catered to the entertainment needs of middle class. When once the rural folk also joined the bandwagon of cine audience, there arose a need for different themes. How the Zamindars were feeling about ryots and what impression they carry about rural folk, etc., attracted the attention of some creative film makers. They were content with middle class consciousness, but not proletarian consciousness. The second item is taken care of after independence by progressive Writers Association, IPTA 1943, Prajanatyamandali, etc. But they too failed in creating alternative peoples culture. It's a harsh historical reality.


"Ibid., p.128.

"Indian Peoples Theatre Arts in Bombay and Prajanatyamandali in Vijayawada were founded in 1943."
The specific feature of the time is legitimization of bourgeois hegemony and legitimization of dominant nationalist ideology. **Rytu Bidda** succeeded in manipulating peasant consciousness.

**Rytu Bidda** means a peasant. India is predominantly an agricultural country. Popular saying is that ryot is backbone of the country. Historically, agriculture offers a settled life to a nomadic man. For quite a long time the produce was just sufficient to feed the hungry people. Marketable surplus is a rare phenomenon. Hence, ryot's living condition is mostly hand to mouth. He is prone to natural calamities such as drought and cyclonic storms apart from high land revenue burden. The nature and character of land revenue depends upon the ruler who has control over the ryots. The story chosen by the maker of the movie is that of colonial period and place is coastal Andhra. With Lord Cornwallis permanent land revenue settlement, the Zamindari mode began to operate along with ryotwari system. In **Rytu Bidda**, a particular Zamindari is studied. Since the story mainly revolves round a peasant, the title is appropriately chosen.

The theme of **Rytu Bidda** is about the necessity of unity of peasants. The village usurer and his evil designs, the election scenario, the factionalism, the vandalism of Zamindar's henchmen were better portrayed in this film. The rural indebtedness is
vulnerable point of exploitation. This is more relevant even to the present day.

Contemporary social life is well depicted. Unlike mythologies, **Rytu Bidda** cinema is about living human beings. In any frame, there is evidence that this film is about the village of contemporary times. One gets the impression that there is direct link between this film and actual life. The cyclone of 1938 which shook the Krishna district found a place in **Rytu Bidda**. The opening of the film is with sunrise. **Ramajogi**'s song awakens the ryot folk. There is cock fight, goat fight, thrashing of paddy, watering of fields by using **Etam** (pumping of water from well in a traditional native style), bullocks with ploughs, transporting of grain bags in bullock carts are the visuals that are extensively used in this film. The urbanisation has made the peoples lives mechanical. Those urban audience whose origins were villages definitely admire the scenes of churning of curd, spinning wheel, feeding bran to buffaloes, girls playing hide and seek game by tying cloth over their eyes, fetching of drinking water from village common well with pairs of pots borne by a yoke and thrashing redgram or **pulses**.

There is a message in this film. Through Ramajogi's character the duties of Ryots are envisaged.
Nidra *melkonara tammuda*, Gadha nidra *melkonara tammuda* 0! Zamindari rytu tammuda!

[Brother, awake from the slumber o Zamindari Rytu brother arise and awake from the deep slumber].

*Karu* chikatulu *vichera*, swatantrya *Bhanududayinchera*.  
[Night has dawn, sun of independence did rise] .

*Rajyamunaku* Rytu Gunde *kaya*  
[Ryot is heart of the state]

*Samrajyamunaku* Rytu Raksha *ra*  
[Ryot is saviour of empire]

*Nivipudu kandlu Teravakunna, Ni kennatiki Mukti ledura*  
[Open your eyes otherwise no emancipation ever]

*Eruvaka vachindira, Dukkiteddu Ranke vesera*  
Tolakari pulakarinchera, Ni B.hooodevi Pooja Salpara  
[Sowing season started, bullocks are anxious for ploughing, seasonal rains started. It's time do worship mother earth].

Similarly the importance of ryot is made pretty clear.

*Rytu pai Anuragam choopani Rajulundaganela*  
[Why there should be any ruler who do not love ryot].  
*Rytu lenide rajyam ledanu nitini encharadela*  
[Why don't they point out that without ryot there is no state].

In one of the election speech the contesting candidate of ryots *Rami* Reddy tells: ryots are responsible for the survival of government.

In Nagapuram village Ryot Sangham was very active. In Ryot Sangham office there was photo of Bollina *Muniswamy* Naidu, who was
popular leader of the Non-Brahmin Movement in Madras Presidency.

The following words were written: Rytu Bandhava who dedicated his life in the service of ryots. In coming days ryot state will be established and ryots Sangham will rule. Gandhiji's portrait was also hanged. The symbol of ryot Sangham was plough and sickle. In the village public meetings were held by the contesting candidates. Here, the value of vote is preached excellently in Rytu Bidda which is relevant any day in democracy.

Rytu ke votiyyya valenanna
[Brother cast your vote for Ryot only]

Ni kashta sukhamulu ryot pratinidhi Tirchagalačanna
[Ryot representative solve your miseries]

Sistu bharam chala hechchanna
[You are burdened with high rates of land revenue]

Pantella udchina sistu kainanu chaladoyanna
[Entire yield is insufficient even to pay land revenue]

Ni kashtamula dircheti yodhudu Ryot
[Only Ryot representative emancipate your sorrows]

Votu viluva telusukoranna
[Brother know the worth of your vote]

Oka poota tindike votunichchuta siggu chettanna
[Brother its shameful thing to sell your vote for one day meal]

Otutone mundu swecha kota pattavalasiyunnadi
[you can seize the fort of freedom through vote only]

Mundu kalam rytu denanna!
[Brother don't forget coming future is of ryots]!

palanam nichetidi rytenanna
[Brother you will emerge as ruler] ..,

Nivennukonna pratinidiye pettanadaranna!
[Your representative will be your master]!

kulamuto manakemijolamma
[why do you mind caste]!
This song is very powerful. B.Narasimha Rao's music is melodious and the tune is catchy.

The class character is dominant in this song. It is conceived that ryots are all one lot, one caste against Zamindari class. There should be no division in this vast ryot caste and any attempt to divide this caste should be foiled. The vision of future India is envisaged in this song. It is so optimistic! Eventually Rami Reddy wins! Celebration of victory, procession with band music, etc. follows.

Truth and non violence is the stand taken by Gandhiji. Narsi Reddy adopts this philosophy and remained true to his word at the cost of loosing anything. His daughter's engagement is canceled, his son is involved in an accident and eventually died, he lost the jewelry of his wife including her thali, he lost his bullocks, civil court attachment was brought against him. Narsi Reddy tells tolerance and non-violence were his philosophy. He wants to bring mental transformation in Zamindar. The cyclone hit Nagapuram was
extensively damaged. Heaps of paddy submerged. Plantains destructed. Many trees were uprooted. Nature wrought so much havoc that rich and poor became alike. The drowning Karanam was saved by unsiff. Karanam's wife got killed. Sowcar's entire property was Looted by bandits. Both Karanam and Sowcar were now changed men, they decided to help ryots. Narsi Reddy preaches the dire need of unity. He tells the importance and need of self help. All the ryots united and present a charter of 15 demands to the Zamindar. Narsi Reddy reads them:

1. Abolish Bribery
2. Abolish Bonded Labour
3. Eradicate Illiteracy
4. Handover arid lands to peasants
5. Handover arid forest lands to peasants
6. Handover common lands to peasants
7. End Nazarana system (presentation of gifts)
8. Reduce Irrigational cess
9. Give remission of land revenue when crops fail
10. Write off outstanding land revenue taxes
11. Introduce permanent settlement
12. Cut short Zamindari expenditure to 1,10 of its income
13. Rule Zamindari with the counsel of peoples representatives.
14. Only ryots are landlords
15. Zamindars are only trustees of lands.

He presents a charter of 15 demands to the Zamindar and fixes a deadline of one month. In case of the eventual failure of getting demands fulfilled he declares nonviolent Satyagraha till the end. When Narsi Reddy was summoned to Zamindar's court there he declares: "He does not have enmity with Zamindar. His target is the authoritarian Zamindari officers and their policies." Narsi Reddy sympathises with the Zamindar whose son is kidnapped. When
Zamindar expresses his parental anguish that he has only one son, Narsi Reddy consoles him that he lost his grown up son. He consoles not to worry and his ryot Sangham would help in tracing the kidnapped little Zamindar. At last truth triumphed, with members of the Ashram spinning Charaka, picture ends with the sentence: "Universal love is good
Universal love is happy
No difference between rich and poor.
No difference between ryot and king".

The Zamindar could not tolerate defiance of his word even in unimportant matters. Soothing words pay rewards and unpleasant words cause cut of salary in Zamindaris. Anything can be through bribe is the rule of Zamindari administration. But when this strategy failed he gets irritated. He wants to dismiss all of them who are in his service and acted against his will. At this point Zamindar's wife advises that instead of dismissing and changing many officers, why zamindar cannot transform himself? The transformation of Zamindar was hastened with the kidnap of little Zamindar. When once he realizes that his own brother was responsible for the kidnap of his son and Kasa Subbamma was at the back of all the evils done to Nagapuram people and Narsi Reddy was innocent the Zamindar was totally reformed. He dedicates his zamin to Rytu Sangham and declares himself as one among the ryots. Thus Ramabrahamam, the director gave a melodramatic end to the cinema.
Ravages of cyclone, united people of all castes and distinctions of the village.

Gudavalli Ramabrahmam took up a revolutionary theme for his *Rytu Bidda*. The landlord-peasant relations are the basis for this film. Most of the present day electoral irregularities, crime, wickedness, etc. were well depicted in this film. They were shown as a heritage of electoral politics. Coercion, appeasement, cruelty, buying voters, etc. were the tools used by contestants who wish to be elected by wrong means. The political objectives of *Rytu Bidda* belong to middle class. *Rytu Bidda* is a sample of forthcoming bourgeois rule. No doubt it is an anti Zamindari film. In the history of Telugu motion pictures, *Rytu Bidda* sounded the kettle drums in triumph.94

Those were the days when Prakasam Pantulu was about to move a Zamindari bill in Madras Assembly in 1939. *Rytu Bidda* helped Prakasam as propaganda picture. Similarly, this film helped in the District Board Elections too with anti Zamindari propaganda. There was no question of voting either to Zamindars or to their candidates by the voters who had seen *Rytu Bidda*. In fact, there is nothing in the picture which ignites the people to raise a banner of revolt against Zamindars. Attempts have been made only

to bring mental **transformation** through peaceful means and thereby getting ryot's **demands** fulfilled. However, Venkatagiri and Bobbili Zamindars issued notices for a ban on the exhibition of **Rytu Bidda**. The irony is, censors had no objection while releasing the **film**. The provincial rulers saw a threat in the film in as much as the obedient labourers on the field might turn against them after seeing the film. Not only they got it banned but also they indulged in setting fire to prints of the film in some places. Nellore Magistrate banned the film in Venkatagiri town and in the entire Gudur Division. In Gudur Division there were not only Zamindari villages but we find many government villages also. District Magistrate issued ban orders in these villages also subject to the approval of government. The Madras Government deliberately delayed. One Chekuson company which was exhibiting **Rytu Bidda** in a tent was given lot of trouble by men of the Zamindar. In spite of many hurdles people patronised **Rytu Bidda**. This was the first film where peoples role was portrayed. The contemporary press, the **Navashakti, Zamin Rytu, Vauhini**, etc., gave full cooperation.

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Rytu Bidda won the acclamation of important persons. Maganti Bapineedu, Parliamentary Secretary, of Congress Party, said, "This is the first film of this kind in entire south India Rytu Bidda has a message to the people."99 One film critic Nanduri Bangarayya in his article100 praises the film for its nativity. One important observation is that India attained independence on 15 August 1947 and thereby colonial rule came to an end. But the ban imposed on the exhibition of Rytu Bidda has continued even under self government. In Vuyyuru, the proprietor of Sri Ekambareswara Picture palace sought the permission for the exhibition of Rytu Bidda. The Krishna District Collector ruled out the application saying there was still ban on Rytu Bidda. It was unfortunate that colonial restrictions should continue even after 1947 on such a progressive social film like Ryot Bidda.101

99Andhra Patrika, 1 September 1939.

100Andhra Patrika, 8 September 1939.