



Plays And Peseant Movement: An Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between the art forms and the peseant movement of Andhra Pradesh by mainly focussing on the most significant and popular plays of that time. The study has been done from the perspective developed in sociology of literature. Art is an outcome of creativity. It can be used as a-weapon to exercise evils in society, Man has an inherent urge for progress, And the urge drives him for a change, break the old and build new, that is better. Art is no more for the sake of art; it is for promoting the well-being of the society, for keeping up its moral values and moulding the lives of people in a better fashion. It is proposed that 'reading' any form of literature will simultaneously yield an 'understanding' of the 'social realities' of that time.

Keywords : Plays, Peseant Movement, Social Realities

INTRODUCTION

In the history of Telugu drama a new spirit emerged since 1943. Those were the days when fascism gripped the entire world. There was conflict between peace and violence; rich and poor; and justice and injustice. During those days, young people enlightened with socialistic views, educated the mass through their dramas and youth associations. Many young writers joined Progressive Writers Association and abundantly produced street plays, plays and playlets.

The progressive writers encouraged progressive trends in all spheres of human life and activity, social welfare, political freedom, the effacement of caste and creed and banning of religious conflicts through their works.

The frightful and tragic straggle of the Telangana Peasants produced many writers of progressive outlook, who dealt the events of the whole movement like exploitation, atrocities, illegal exactions etc. Communist Party raised the slogan 'Land to the tiller' and began to work against the then government with the help of the peasantry, the writers and the Praja Natya Mandali.

Plays

On the eve of the independence and in the first few years thereafter politico-economic and social problems dominated the Telugu stage. These new plays made their appearance in the late 'Forties and early Fifties', under organized auspices, had an obvious ideological motivation. The politics of class conflict were grist to the mill of progressive play of class wrights. Notable among them are Sunkara and Vasireddy. While Mundadugu (Satyanarayana, S and Bhaskara Rao V, 1945), written by these twin writers is dealing with the situation in Telangana, Maa Bhumi (Satyanarayana, S and Bhaskara Rao V, 1947) is depicting the plight of the tenants in the zamindari villages. Both the plays had a phenomenal spell of mass appeal. 'Sunkara's Guerilla (1973) and Vasireddy's Potugadda (1953), touching other aspects of the same problem, are worth mentioning.

Mundadugu (Forward-Step)

Synopsis

Chakradhara Rao, a middle aged bachelor, is the notorious Zamindar (rich feudal lord) of a village Lakshampuram in Telangana. The poor peasants, Kotayya, Veerayya and Pullayya

take loan from a reasonably well-off friend Achhayya to pay taxes to the land revenue officer. The officer, Nagendram, with the full support of the Zamindar, extracts money from the poor peasants without giving receipts. As the peasants know that Nagendram collects taxes for the pompous celebration of his daughter's marriage their Union (Sangham, off shoot of Communist Party), under the leadership of young Narayana Rao, unanimously declares their unwillingness, rather refusal to pay such unjust taxes.

Learning about their decision Nagendram and Zamindar send 'goondas' who are unsuccessful in killing Pullayya and Narayana Rao. Achhayya, the rich farmer wants to give his only daughter, Vimala, in marriage to the Zaminadar. The Zamindar gives more troubles to Narayana Rao. Vimala, the daughter of Narayana Rao, conveys her hatred towards Zamindar to her father and refuses to marry the Zamindar.

Meanwhile the Zamindar succeeds in sending Narayana Rao and Pullayya to jail under false accuse. The helpless peasants are now supported and encouraged by Vimala and Kasim, Narayana Rao's friend.

Soon Narayana Rao and Pullayya return from jail. Nagendram and his goondas are caught while abducting Vimala and are sent to jail. The Zamindar bereft of support flees. Achhayya having learnt about the Zamindar's true character gives Vimala in marriage to Narayana Rao. Narayana Rao asks his fellowmen to take the 'forward step' towards the ultimate victory.

Analysis

This play is the first of its kind written by Sunkara Satyanarayana and Vasireddy Bhaskara Rao. As the authors claim, three thousand copies of 'Mundadugu' play were sold away within three months after publishing it. After few shows, the Madras Advisory Government banned the staging of Mundadugu. Expressing dissatisfaction to this, on the advice of Andhra Praja Natya Mandali 'Mundadugu Day' was observed on August 15, 1946 in whole Andhra.

The play enacted by Praja Natya Mandali motivated the consciousness of the masses and helped them to take a forward step in their struggle for their just rights. If one compares this play, Mundadugu (Forward Step), with the plays of that time, it is a revolt on conventional plays. So, in a sense it is a forward step even otherwise.

In this play, the authors portrayed the wicked nature of the Zamindar, the evil mentality of Nagendram, the opportunistic thinking of a rich peasant, and the relation between the villagers under the leadership of Narayana Rao. The authors illustrated in their play that if all the poor peasants and poor labourers unite and fight against the evil doers, they will have the final victory.

Vasireddy and Sunkara are successful to a large extent in portraying the socio-economic and political condition of Telangana during that time. They have not directly mentioned much about the Telangana Peasant Movement, because they have written this play much before the movement is in its full swing.

As Vidwan Viswam (1945) pointed out, this play is not directly related to the peasant movement. But, the writers portrayed the socio-economic conditions of the peasants under the rule of feudal lords. It should be considered as a best play in view of the vigour of their composition and narration of the theme.

Maa Bhumi (My Land)

Synopsis:

Jagannadha Reddy is one of the many dictatorial Deshmukhs in Nizam's regime. Overlooking his declaration to abstain from Bandagi's death anniversary ceremony, Veera Reddy along with his wife Seetamma, sister Kamala, and other followers like Dada, Subhan, Rami Reddy, Yellamanda attends it. The deshmukh unleashes his anger on them.

Soon the villagers form their own union and fly their union flags, much to the enragement of Jagannadha Reddy and his 'Patwari' Venkata Rao. In many ways the Deshmukh tortures Veera Reddy and his fellow-men. He tries to induce disharmony among them and tries to bribe Veera Reddy. When his plans fail, the Deshmukh, with the help of Amin, the police inspector, gets him arrested and beaten up.

The Deshmukh and his men now plunder Veera Reddy's house and try to assault his sister. While trying to save her Dada and Seethamma are shot by Amin. By seeing a huge mob coming to rescue Veera Reddy's family, the Deshmukh and his 'goondas' flee-off. Somehow, Veera Reddy with the help of Ramudu, the Deshmukh's barber, escapes from the palace, where he was imprisoned and comes to his house at that moment.

Veera Reddy magnanimously forgives Venkata Rao and Mastan, the goondas, and lets them off. The crowd gathers near Dada's and Seethamma's graves and takes a solemn pledge that they will protect their land till their last breath.

Analysis

Vasireddy and Sunkara jointly wrote three plays, in which Maa Bhumi is the last and most popular one. Even, this play was also banned, but afterwards, because of the people's pressure, the ban was lifted. The authors claim that two thousand copies of this play were sold off within two months. There were two hundred troupes staging this play during Telangana movement and around twenty lakhs of people witnessed it.

This play depicts the fight between poor peasants and rich landlords. It suggests that casteism and religious bigotry are to be abandoned in the class struggle and it advocates 'land to the tiller'.

As the bulk of the population was illiterate, it is rather prudent on the part of the authors to select drama as a medium to propagate the ideology in which they believe. With their emotional and provocative dialogues, the authors provided much inspiration to the exploited peasants in their struggle for their just rights. The dialogues below would agitate the mind and heart of even the least imaginative spectator.

"Hell is this cruel dictatorship of Nizam, Oh! Peasant,

For arts and riches abode is this Telangana, Oh! Peasant,

Poor peoples' throat-cutting butchers' Rule, Oh! Peasant"

"With cock's crow, I get up, bite something and go to his (Deshmukh's) bungalow. Again it is in the midnight I reach back my home. Then when can I take my son into my hands?"

"Long ago, when my father died, you lent me one bag of paddy. For that I paid back fourteen bags. When can this debt be cleared off?"

The ending of the play reveals that the authors could not foresee the consequences of the head-on confrontation of the peasantry with the feudal lords at the time of their writing. Perhaps it might be too early for them to foresee the coming events like Razakari movement, police action by Indian union, the splitting of the Communist Party and above all the gradual withdrawal of peoples' support. It is to be pointed out that the authors emphasised on total unity among all poor and exploited people to throw away the tyrannical rule of the feudal lords.

The peasants occupy their own lands and take an oath that they would never leave their lands. It is important to note that the play shows only a temporary ousting of the feudal rule, and not its complete annihilation, as the Deshmukh's threat is still imminent. However, towards the end, the peasants take an oath that they would give up their lives but not the land, raising slogans 'Andhra Maha Sabhaki Jai'; 'Land to the tiller'; and 'This is my land'. Many learned people expressed their opinions about Maa Bhumi. Below are some excerpts (Satyanarayana & Bhaskara Rao, 1980. Pp. v-x).

P. Sundarayya - "I read Maa Bhumi. My thanks are due to the authors. They have portrayed the true and real conditions of Telangana people in an effective way".

Ravi Narayana Reddy - "The play Maa Bhumi is portraying Telangana life in a realistic and lively way".

Kopparapu Subba Rao - "Maa Bhumi drives away the incompetence of Telangana people and lights the revolutionary torch in Telangana. With this a new era begins in the Andhra-Dramatic field."

Viswanatha Satyanarayana - "Even though the play is short, it is quite beautiful. In this play, one can find the pure, integrated Telugu language in heaps; this play starts with Bandagi's tomb and also ends with tombs. It is the skill of the authors to tighten very well the beginning and the ending in a real poetic composition".

Potugadda (Native Land)

Synopsis

After Gajapati, the cruel landlord, flees-off, as a result of people's revolt, all his lands are confiscated and distributed among the villagers. His spacious palace is converted into a night school.

Later, Bhimanna, Gajapati's sardar, visits the school disguised, to get information, when Veerayya, Narayana the peasants, and Mukkanti, the soldier, attending the night school discussing their lessons and plans. Mukkanti soon realises the presence of Bhimanna, and goes out to bring their leader, Prasad. But, they come, only to find that Bhimanna has had already slipped away. Seshagiri takes charge of the school from Sarojini, his sister.

When Prasad comes to know that Seshagiri is instrumental in sending vital information to Gajapati, warns him to behave properly, meanwhile the proposed marriage between Prasad and Sarojini, takes place. Gajapati, with the help of police, attacks the school suddenly and takes it over. He subjects the villagers to unbearable miseries.

Though Prasad escapes, Veerayya and Narayana are arrested; and Mukkanti and Seshagiri join hands with Gajapati. In

the hope of getting more information about the whereabouts of Prasad, Gajapati spreads a rumour that Prasad is dead. Seshagiri refuses to comply with when Gajapati wants him to arrest Sarojini. Soon, the prisoners Veerayya and Narayana escape. Somehow, Prasad is caught and when Gajapati wants to kill him Mukkanti stops him saying that much information can be obtained, if Sarojini is tortured in front of Prasad.

Gajapati in anger and revenge shoots Seshagiri and Sarojini. When he realises that the villagers are coming enmasse to help them, he slips away, but is caught and tied up by Mukkanti. Sarojini dies in the hands of Prasad.

Analysis

In Telangana, under the leadership of 'Sanghams', people revolted against the atrocities and exploitations of the landlords and their followers. Scared of the consequences most the landlords left to cities. After their departure, the people distributed the lands among themselves. They even converted landlords' palaces into night schools. Under the leadership of Sangham, the people started many developmental activities in villages through 'Gram Raj'.

However, the landlords who left to cities again started raiding the villages with the help of police and continued their atrocities. And the people too prepared to attack the landlords, their goondas and the police en masse. Many of the Sangham members lost their lives in such encounters. This is the theme of the play. Vasireddi Bhaskara Rao dealt with the play Potugadda independently. From the beginning till the end, the play is interwoven with plots and counter-plots making it, highly absorbing to the audience.

During the days of the Movement, the members of the Communist Party as well as other people used to get married just, by exchanging garlands. It reflected their progressive thinking. In this play, the author illustrated this point by arranging a marriage scene in which Prasad and Sarojini exchange their garlands. Immediately, after their marriage police raid the village. Prasad manages to escape and goes under ground, and Dora (landlord) occupies the village and starts exploiting the people" with the help of Bhimanna and Seshagiri.

This play is a portrayal of the Telangana socio-economic and political conditions and the atrocities, exploitations of the landlords. It also depicts the peoples' revolt and their sacrifices for the sake of the movement.

Guerilla Synopsis

In their forest hide-out, Veera Reddy along with his fellow comrades Yellamanda, Subhan, Rami Reddy, Ramesh, a doctor, Kamala, Kondadu, a tribal head and Lashmi, tribal head's wife, makes prayers to the pictures of Dada and Seethamma, the characters of the play Maa Bhumi.

Ramesh is assigned as a medico of the camp; Kondadu, as 'courier'; Subhan as an overall guardian and Lakshmi for bringing food.

When army raided his village, Rangapuram, the Deshmukh, Gadi Reddy, tries to run off, but is caught by the villagers and sent to the camp through Raju, the sentry. He brings him there, captive along with a letter which states his atrocities. Veera Reddy decides against killing him before getting some information, and so, they imprison him in a cave.

One day, the sentry comes and informs them the news that reserve police are heading towards 'Goodem' (hamlet) side. They all go and fight. Kondadu is caught, but he cleverly swallows the secret letters. Though the police torture him he does not reveal the camp's true whereabouts. Soon 'Dalam' fights with police and rescues Kondadu.

When Veera Reddy learns about Jagannadha Reddy's return to Goodem, he sends Rarnudu to get information. But

Rarnudu comes back to the camp after shooting down Jagannadha Reddy and Amin. As the men are applauding him, the police try to raid the camp. But the Dalam manages to change to another place, as Yellaamanda shows himself up deliberately.

After Jagannadha Reddy's and Amin's deaths more police come to the Goodem. They torture Yellamanda, as they fail to get any information, and lock him up. Sankaram, a sympathiser, secretly frees him. Knowing this, the police again raid the camp, but the Dalam fights against them. Soon all the enemies are shot dead and the police are driven away. Only Yellamanda is killed in the encounter. All Dalam members voice their slogans loudly. "Final victory is ours" and "The land to the tiller!"

Analysis

The author, Sunkara Satyanarayana, in the preface clarifies that the play Guerilla is the continuation of Maa Bhumi. Thus, it is to be considered as the second part of Maa Bhumi. All the characters of Maa Bhumi except Seethamma and Dada, and some new characters are there in this play.

In Telangana, people fought against the landlords and police for land, and several other socio-economic problems. The actual tiller does not own even a cent of land. While, the police raids increased on villages most of the Sangham members and leaders went underground and started working for people from there. They introduced a new technique in fighting called 'Guerilla Warfare'.

After the peoples' revolt, the Deshmukh and his goondas flee to Hyderabad. When the police raids became intense, most of the members hide in forest area. Depicting the landlord's atrocities and exploitations, the author, writes about a Deshmukh, Gadi Reddy, who was caught while trying to flee after peoples' revolt. He belongs to Rangapuram village. This landlord was sent to Veera Reddy's camp through sentry Raju, with a letter which reads -

"When Mangamma could not come to 'veti' (forced labour) Gadi Reddy summons her to his bungalow and got her clothes removed in front of many people and then beaten her up thoroughly. It is fun to the landlord to rape the arrested ladies. By now he has raped many ladies, for which there is no count. Many women committed suicide because of him. Many peasants and labourers left the village to nearby Andhra villages or to cities. Gadi Reddy has devoured their properties".

Most of the camp- members decided to give him death punishment, but Veera Reddy says that they can get lot of information from him and he asks Rami Reddy to arrest him in a cave.

When Kamala Switches on the transistor, the news follows like-

"Just now received news, well renowned Rangapuram Deshmukh, Gadi Reddy was caught by goondas. He is a great person who has done many good things. He has constructed a fantastic temple in Rangapuram. Nobody knows what has happened to him. He might have been killed by those goondas, unofficial news."

The above lines clearly illustrate the then government's opinion regarding the communists, the Deshmukhs and also the movement as a whole, Veera Reddy asks Rarnudu to get the information about the Deshmukh, Jagannadha Reddy (the Deshmukh who flees to city in the play Maa Bhumi after people's revolt) who comes back to the village with police. But, like Hanuman in Ramayana, Rarnudu kills both Jagannadha Reddy and police Amin and comes back to the camp. Patwari Venkata Rao was also killed. Then with unbounded happiness Veera say -

"With this Patwari's death, the whole district of two thousand

villages is liberated. We have got rid off the Deshmukhs and their supporters. Now, the plice cannot enter these villages...” and also ads- “The land for which we are all fighting has become ours now”.

Ramesh continues -

“Not only that, in all liberated villages, ‘Gram Raj’ has been established. They are distributing land to the poor labourers. Now we are implementing our slogan ‘Land to the tiller’.

Both Vasireddy and Sunkara were peasants hailing from Krishna district and they participated in the movement. Vasireddy (1914-1957) was a Telugu Pandit and had significant knowledge of Hindi literature as well as English literature. He was also an active member of Progressive Writers’ Association. He was a devout Communist and gave away his entire property for the cause of Communist Party. He was also known as a dialogue-writer and lyric-writer for few Telugu movies. Sunkara (1909-1975) participated in Nationalist

Movement as a member of Congress. He was subjected to severe lathi charge and was sent to jail many times. He authored many literary works and contributed many progressive and popular psalms.

Concluding Reflections

These four plays of the Peseant movement tap the gold-mine for their ‘trans-formation’ aims and in the process, they have forged a powerful, literally powerful, instrument for handling the complex theme of ‘revolution’. Nothing like this could have happened in a society, where people’s creative system did not have to follow amidst their historical destiny of nearly fifty centuries of deprivation and oppression. In this historically determined context, therefore, the theme of revolution could be taken up, without the tortous indirection of a Genet or the experimentation of a Brecht. These four plays, therefore, represent the finest flowers of this literary movement, as also, its sharpest weapon in the srevice of loosening, if not breaking up, of the ‘stubborn structure’.

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