

Telugu Folklore Films: The Case of *Patala Bhairavi*

S.V. Srinivas

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The folklore film was very popular in Telugu between the 1940s and the late 1960s and played an important role in the careers of both Akkineni Nageswara Rao and N. T. Rama Rao. Folklore films sometimes drew on popular plays or fantasy and romances already in print. They were often produced from stories generated by the film industry itself. Strictly speaking then, the folklore film has very little to do with 'folk tales' which are supposedly timeless, of indigenous origin and transmitted orally. The folklore film was strongly influenced by Hollywood's 'orientalist' fantasies as well as the Douglas Fairbanks style stunt films (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999). The popular press in Telugu has generated a large volume of 'folklore' which like the folklore film is a modern product and is not directly linked to 'authentic' folk tales. For example, *Chandamama*, packed with 'inauthentic' folktales, was started in July 1947 by B. Nagireddy and Chakrapani who later established Vijaya Pictures, the makers *Patala Bhairavi* (K. V. Reddy, 1951). But popular 'folklore' in the printed form also had a significant adult readership for a while and seemed to have grown in tandem with the detective novel as is evident from the advertisements for folklore novels in detective novels in the seventies. The publishers and writers of the detective novel produced these novels.¹ We are therefore dealing with an *industrial* genre—a creation of the film and print industries feeding on each other. The eminent Telugu film critic Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao has argued that the folklore film was the film industry's response to the huge spurt in the popularity of the cinema during World War II as well as rising costs of film production. Pre-war production companies could not cope with the new situation which demanded a large volume of films that had the potential to generate profits proportionate to increasing investments and, 'in such a situation the so-called "folklore" pictures provided the solution to a really acute problem' (Kutumba Rao 1964: 5). In fact, the folklore film proved to be such a viable commercial proposition that all major production companies and studios made folklore films in the forties and the fifties.

Throughout the forties and fifties, even as successful folklore films were being made, film journals and other magazines condemned folklore films. A columnist of the reputed film magazine *Roopavani* stated, 'It is common practice in folklore films for producers, relying on the backwardness of the people, to openly display *avineeti* [immorality, corruption] and depict women's organs as close to nudity as possible, to rake in money' (*Roopavani* July 1948: 7). An article in *Telugu Swatantra* called folklore films a 'disease' (Bruhaspathi 1949). Unlike the mythological and the historical, which had their moments of respectability, the folklore film was never considered respectable in its own time². K. A. Abbas's assessment of the relative merits of different kinds of films is illustrative of the perception of the genre as being uniquely and unforgivably lowbrow and regressive:

¹ The list of publications by the publisher of Tempo Rao's *Shoot to Kill* (Madras: MVS Publications, 1971) contains folklore novels and serials written by famous detective novelists like Bhayankar and Krishnamohan.

² In recent times, however, almost all films made before the mid-sixties have become respectable due to their wholesale appropriation by peddlers of nostalgia.

The popularity of early mythologicals, aesthetically crude as they might have been, *was a manifestation of growing national consciousness*. These popular legends of the gods and goddesses, familiar even to the commonest and poorest Indian, provided an oblique affirmation of the national sentiment against the threatened domination of alien culture. The 'historicals' with their crude and tinselly but nevertheless 'popular' recreation of the 'Glory that was Ind', which came on the heels of mythologicals, *corresponded to the general mood of revivalism which also was a part of our cultural renaissance*. ...the war-time and post-war *lowering of the popular taste all over India helped to reinforce the trend for big-budget folk-lore adventure films* as exemplified by the amazing all-India success of the Hindustani remake of the Tamil *Chandralekha* (Abbas 1961:10-11, emphases added).

Abbas thus suggests that the folklore film not only did not play a positive role in shaping our national consciousness but also reflected and possibly caused the degeneration of the nation's popular taste.

Kutumba Rao feels that folklore films were 'culturally something of a retreat' (1964:5) because they became popular at the cost of realistic socials. He adds: 'Telugu films lost their "National" character and nativity [industry term for depictions of native culture on screen] because of the success of the "folklore" picture and the revival of mythologicals' (1964: 6). The larger problem, Kutumba Rao seems to suggest, was that these films negated what was seen as a very positive development that the socials of the pre-war period contributed to: realism. Realism itself is seen as extremely valuable because it was the vehicle for Telugu nationalism. The folklore film therefore is often spoken of as an amalgam of absences: it lacked taste (it was 'vulgar'), 'nativity', realism and the reformist/nationalist agenda associated with the social via realism.

There are serious problems with the argument that realism is in itself progressive but it is not possible to discuss them in this article. Contrary to the widespread assumption from the 1930s onwards, it is incorrect to say that the folklore film and the social are completely different and have nothing in common. It is important to pay attention to the reciprocity between the folklore film and the social. Only then will we be able to come out of the simplistic and misleading opposition that has been created between folklore films and socials by generations of film critics.

Both socials and folklore films were made by the same production houses and featured the same stars while a number of famous directors of the forties and fifties, including B. N. Reddi, made both kinds of films. Let us take the instance of *Patala Bhairavi*. *Patala Bhairavi* was made by Vijaya Pictures a company which made highly successful socials throughout the 50s. In fact the film came after Vijaya Pictures' hit social *Shavukaru* (L. V. Prasad, 1950) which was hailed by critics for its supposed 'reformism'. The director K. V. Reddy was closely associated with B. N. Reddi in the 1940s and made saint films (*bhakti chitralu*), mythologicals and socials in addition to folklore films.

There are thematic similarities between folklore films and socials. But more importantly, we need to note that it is not only socials but also folklore films which deal with social issues of the period in which they were made. Let me discuss two sequences from *Patala Bhairavi* to illustrate both these points.³

The first sequence occurs immediately after the song '*premakosame...*' when Nepalamantrikudu (S.V. Ranga Rao) takes Ramudu (NTR) to the entrance of Patala Bhairavi's subterranean abode. The hidden entrance is protected by supernatural powers which Ramudu has to overcome. In the course of overcoming these obstacles, Ramudu has to jump into a blazing fire. While the sorcerer encourages him, Ramudu perched on a tree closes his eyes in prayer. Cut to a scene of his mother praying to Lord Rama. (The brief shot of the hero's mother is the last of a series of such shots which are assembled together to form the just concluded song sequence which has the hero being led by the sorcerer). Cut to Ramudu jumping into fire, which turns out to be the entrance to an underground cave. What is interesting about the shot of the praying mother is that it is not Rama who is directly mobilized as the protector of the hero but a mode of worship which is associated with the familial domain. It is as if we are witnessing the conflict between two modes of worship.

An important opposition set up by the film is the one between the domestic mode of worship associated with Rama and the propitiation of goddesses worshipped by the sorcerer by sacrifice. In this film Rama inhabits domestic space—the home—and is frequently worshipped by the hero's widowed mother. On the other hand there are goddesses who are worshipped in an 'uncivilized' manner by the sorcerer. For example, Nepalamantrikudu cuts off his hand to make a goddess appear before him. And Patala Bhairavi herself requires the sacrifice of a brave and righteous man, who is as powerful and as much a man as the sorcerer himself. Further, each mode of worship is differently gendered: male god and female devotee of the domestic mode as opposed to the male devotee and female object of worship of the sacrificial mode.

The second instance I discuss 'rehabilitates' Patala Bhairavi and the process of rehabilitation is made possible by the transformation of the goddess. When Ramudu beheads the sorcerer, the fearsome, larger than life statue of Patala Bhairavi crumbles and a benevolent goddess, dressed in sparkling white, appears before him and gives him a small statuette which will allow him to make the goddess appear whenever he pleases. The statuette bears a remarkable resemblance to the idols of Rama in that both are aesthetically pleasing and benign looking, unlike the larger statue. It is as if the goddess is freed from the sacrificial mode of worship once the sorcerer is killed. In other words Patala Bhairavi is effectively transformed into a Hindu, Brahminical goddess and remains so for the rest of the film. Moreover Ramudu gives the statuette to his mother who places along with the statues of Rama, Lakshmana, Sita and Hanuman. The goddess is thus incorporated into the domestic space.

³ Since the film has been released in Telugu, Tamil and Hindi I will not test the readers' patience with a plot summary.

The depiction of Patala Bhairavi before she is domesticated is reminiscent of the representation of Poleramma worship (by Dalits) in the reformist social *Malapilla* (G. Ramabrahmam, 1938). This mode of worship has been and continues to be an important signifier of ‘backwardness’ in Telugu cinema. *Malapilla*, which suggests that Dalits have to give practices up like drinking and animal sacrifice—associated with Poleramma worship—in order to enter Hindu temples, has two long sequences devoted to Devi worship, sacrifice etc. In the second of these sequences, the Congress reformer, Chowdarayya, who leads the temple entry agitation appeals to the Dalits to give up these ‘barbaric’ practices.

Patala Bhairavi’s gesture towards the reformist social raises questions about the thematic continuities between the social and the folklore film. The point is not that the two genres share a politics—they certainly do—but the way this politics is presented in these films. It is important to note that *Patala Bhairavi* constructs the opposition between the familiar world—the home and kingdom—and the world of magic, which exists in the jungle beyond the kingdom. The familiar is the *normative order* that is threatened by the outside. In other words *Patala Bhairavi* ratifies certain social relationships by presenting them as ‘natural’ and given. At the same time some other practices are presented as inhuman and uncivilized. It is not a coincidence that the practices which the film depicts as uncivilized are practices of marginalized communities.

Let me now discuss another important issue raised by *Patala Bhairavi*: the emergence of the populist star-protagonist in Telugu cinema.

Quite early in *Patala Bhairavi*, Tota Ramudu and his friend Anji go to the city square and join a crowd of people watching a song performance. The song itself is on heroism and states that every eon (‘yugam’) has a hero (‘kathanayakudu’, literally protagonist) who leads the populace into a state of well-being. This, the singer adds, is the lesson of history. When the singer asks the audience, towards the end of the song, if the bravest of men is amongst the audience (*aa ati sahasule unnara?*), one onlooker quickly shouts Ramudu’s name (only to be mildly rebuked by the obviously pleased hero). Soon after the song ends Ramudu confronts the queen’s brother (Relangi) who attempts to rob the crowd with the help of some soldiers. Ramudu also organizes the crowd against the soldiers, beating up the king’s brother-in-law in the process. The sequence ends with the crowd shouting the slogan: ‘*kathanayakudiki jai*’, after he is decorated with a turban and wrapped with a shawl.

Significantly, the ceremonial nomination of the protagonist as a hero occurs in and by the public *before* the protagonist confronts the forces of evil. The slogan shouting crowd—the audience within the film—is a framing device which introduces popular approval as an important foundation of heroism. The crowd also underscores the *representative* functions of the protagonist. Ramudu is approved by the populace, as if he is elected to perform the role of the protector of the kingdom. As a consequence of the cheers of approval, his future actions can be read as actions performed for the welfare of the *people* and also on their behalf. The crowd then frames the narrative within a contemporary frame in which the figure of the hero has to be interpreted according to the standards of modern democracy.

Interestingly, even before Ramudu confronts the soldiers he is already *recognized* as a hero (as mentioned above one of the onlookers shouts Ramudu's name). The character Ramudu thus has a history of heroism which is not explained in the film. The audience have to take it as given. Further, the narrative postpones the demonstration of his valour. We witness a cyclical pattern with respect to the depiction of Ramudu's heroism. Only after he is named as '*atisahasudu*' does he confront the soldiers. He is hailed as *kathanayakudu* at a point in the narrative when the villain, Nepalamantrikudu, has not yet been introduced. This narrative pattern of naming Ramudu as the hero and then providing evidence of his heroism is repeated all over again when Nepalamantrikudu, on the lookout for a youth who is as powerful as himself—a man who is not only brave but also treads the path of righteousness—spots Ramudu climbing the palace wall. Once again, it is after he is named as the epitome of heroism and righteousness that Ramudu takes on the might of the king's soldiers inside the palace and soon afterwards declares that he is willing to die for his love rather than disobey the king: all heroic gestures.

How is this time lag, between the naming of Ramudu as a hero of superlative proportions and the narrative's demonstration of his valour, to be understood? The narrative demands that the spectator defer judgement of the protagonist for a period of time. In this duration the spectator is expected to repose her faith in the narrative's ability to satisfy the expectations raised by the qualities attributed to the hero and also a protagonist who is yet to be concretized as a heroic figure. The figure of the hero needs to be seen as the manifestation of the pact between the narrative and the spectator. I would suggest that the narrative constructs the spectator as a repeat viewer in the sense that she is expected to know about the protagonist's abilities. This kind of knowledge is only available to people watching the film for the second time.

Let us not forget that folklore films were indeed very popular. In the 40s and 50s, interesting and, to some observers, inexplicable developments were taking place around the genre. *Roopavani* reported that hundreds of people gathered to see the stars of *Balaraju* (Ghantasala Balaramaiah, 1948) when they toured different parts of Andhra on the occasion of the 100 days celebrations. In Vijayawada and Rajahmundry police lathi-charged crowds which had gathered to glimpse the stars of *Balaraju* (see *Roopavani* July 1948: 7-8). Similar incidents took place during the 100 day celebrations of *Patala Bhairavi* in Bandaru and one reader claimed in a letter to the editor that 80 people received injuries (see *Roopavani* August 1951: 40). What makes the folklore film crucially important for students of cinema is that it is around this genre that some of the earliest instances of mass adulation of film stars were witnessed in the Andhra region. The genre anticipates not only the mobilization around film stars through fans' associations but also the way in which the social film itself was to deploy the male star.

We need to recognize that *Patala Bhairavi* attempts to *account for* the mass adulation of film stars by offering the male star as an object of adulation. It is notable that in earlier films, particularly in a film like *Balaraju*, the popular appeal of the male lead is far in excess of his role in the film. I say this because in this film the 'hero' or central character is Sita, (S. Varalakshmi) and not Balaraju played by Akkineni Nageswara Rao. In this film Balaraju turns into a snake once and dies twice and on all three occasions he is revived by

heroine's efforts. In other words it is the popularity of the film in general and not the heroic role played by Nageswara Rao that made him famous. In *Patala Bhairavi* on the other hand an attempt is made to foreground the male protagonist as a populist figure and the object of adulation. Indeed Ramudu/NTR becomes an object of adulation because the spectator reposes faith in this figure to give pleasure.

The noticeable gap between the naming of Ramudu as the hero and proof of his heroism is an indication of a crucial shift, a shift that was to play a critical role in the Telugu film industry. *Patala Bhairavi*'s importance lies in laying the groundwork for the emergence in the Telugu film industry of the star-system as we know it today. *Patala Bhairavi* offers a promise of fulfillment of certain expectations of the protagonist, expectations which are themselves introduced by the narrative. Later, in the seventies when the star-system centred around male stars was well established, these expectations would be carried over from one film to the next. But at this point of time (1951), there was nothing in the career of NTR to support expectations raised in the early part of the film. NTR had not featured in similar roles earlier and was not a stunt/action hero. Paradoxically, it is precisely the relative insignificance of NTR's star status when the film was being made that allows us to see how the film's narrative creates the space which the *star* is to occupy.

In his discussion of Amitabh Bachchan, M. Madhava Prasad argues 'the star remained a semantic excess of the narrative process, available for future exploitation' (1998: 141). It is possible to argue that Vijaya Pictures which had booked NTR for two years starting 1950 (Venkat Narayan 1985: 206) was trying to create a star image which it could exploit over and over again. But this explanation is inadequate because other films made by Vijaya Pictures with NTR, as a part of this contract, do not present the star in a manner similar to *Patala Bhairavi*. In other words neither the populism associated with Tota Ramudu nor the play with audience expectations is not carried over to the next film. Not even in *Jagadekaveeruni Katha* (made by the same director and production company a decade after *Patala Bhairavi*), do we see any attempt to build on the foundations laid by *Patala Bhairavi*. In fact the '*Patala Bhairavi* mode of star production' does not become prevalent till the seventies. Therefore it is not correct to assume that there is a linear progression from *Patala Bhairavi* to the present.

Interestingly, new mode of presenting the male protagonist as star-persona which was tried out successfully in *Patala Bhairavi* did not become prevalent in later folklore films. But folklore films after *Patala Bhairavi* continued to incorporate populist elements. Folklore films declined around the time when socials began to render the male protagonist in a manner that was strikingly similar to *Patala Bhairavi*, both in terms of populism as well as star-persona centred narratives.

Returning to the beginning of *Patala Bhairavi*, the sequences which create the anticipation of the hero's heroism also serve to produce him as an extraordinary being—paradoxically to demonstrate that he is *not just a gardener* but a 'kathanayakudu' in the making. In fact he is able to represent the interests of the people because he is *unlike* them—despite his socio-economic background. This interplay of subalternity and distinction, has, over the years, become one of standard modes of constructing the star-protagonist. Significantly,

although the gardener hero does not lay any claims to royal ancestry, his heroism is produced as if it were lineage—some thing he is naturally endowed with.

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