

Image of America in Telugu Cinema: A Study of the Cultural Implications

D. Sudha Rani

VNR Vignana Jyothi Institute of Engineering and Technology (Autonomous), Hyderabad.

Email: sudharanikaja@yahoo.co.in

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Abstract

Telugu cinema is one of the most popular art forms among Telugus across the globe. It has played an important role in understanding and depicting the life, society and the culture of Telugus as an authentic art form of the society. This depiction is not restricted to the life in native states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana but continued to the life of immigrant societies inhabited by Telugus across the globe. Albeit migration of Telugus to different countries is a pre independence phenomenon, their migration to USA is more a post independence phenomenon that is unique in many ways. Among them, the cultural implications involved in migration from Andhra Pradesh to America are certainly noteworthy. Telugu cinema took this seriously and treated it on a significant level. In this context, it becomes imperative to study the mediascape of Telugu cinema to understand the Telugus' perspective of America that played significant role in encouraging migration of considerable number of Telugus to America. This paper studies the image of America created by the mediascape of Telugu cinema to understand the Telugu diaspora and the attempt Telugu cinema made in bridging these two cultures (America and Andhra Pradesh) and the cultural implications involved.

Keywords: Telugu cinema, Telugu diaspora, America, mediascapes, image, cultural implications

Introduction

Telugu cinema is one of the popular art forms among Telugus across the globe ever since the screening of Telugu cinema beyond Indian screens began. Till then Telugu cinema entertained the audience across the nation state of India. Telugu cinema popularly known as Tollywood is one of the richest film industries in India (Kohli and Khandekar 2013, P.161) with approximately 349 films made in 2014. Cinema is a significant cultural practice which ensembles art, entertainment, technology, industry and ideology. It is a powerful reflector of society that mirrors social transformations, cultural tensions and new trends that are surfacing in society in interesting ways. At the same time cinema plays a vital role in shaping the social transformations and cultural tensions in the society, more specifically Indian society (Moti Gokulsingh & Wimal Dissanayake 2013, P. 1,2). Telugu cinema is a significant art form depicting various issues of regional, national and international interest (C.S.H.N. Murthy 2016). Telugu films focused on international experience of Telugus following the migration of Telugus to different countries.

Migration of Telugus to other countries began much before the independence and their migration to America has been happening more prominently after the independence of India and it is significant in more than one way. These two factors (Telugu cinema is one of the richest art form in terms of money invested in it and the variety of subjects it deals with and the Telugu diaspora in USA is more compared to the Telugu diaspora in other counties) are very significant factors that form strong basis to study the Telugu cinema made with the American backdrop and about the Telugu diaspora in USA. This would focus on the Telugus' perspective of America as created by the mediascape of Telugu cinema. In this context it is necessary to study the mediascape of Telugu cinema that has created a noteworthy image of America and its role in encouraging migration of Telugus to America. The present paper identifies a considerable number of Telugu films that deal with the relationship of Telugus in home land, Telugu diaspora and America and attempts to study the image of America created by Telugu Cinema. Along with this, this paper also scrutinizes the cultural implications involved in Telugus' migration to America as projected in these select Telugu films.

About Telugu cinema

'Bahubali-1& 2' have reinforced the significance Telugu cinema deserves in the Indian as well as world cinema. Otherwise, western viewers, academics and scholars recognized only Hindi cinema as Indian cinema. It is only after 1960s Indian cinema was considered as a valuable part of world cinema. Indian cinema is a rich art form with many significant attributes. The uniqueness of Indian cinema is the richness of its vernacular languages and the cinema belonging to these languages. Telugu cinema is the most notable among other vernacular languages cinema from India and it is one of the richest in the world in terms of its turnover, size and reach (Kohli and Khandekar 2013, P.161). C.S.H.N. Murthy (2016) observes that the richness of Telugu cinema is not restricted to the number of movies made every year and the money involved in it, he writes 'Indeed Telugu film industry, a legitimate twin of Hindi cinema since the talkie era (1931), is still preserving the much coveted ancient Indian values, cultural and traditional systems by virtue of its ability to produce films of multiple genres and multiple languages.' (360) Considering all these reasons along with its ability to present the truly Indian narratives, C.S.H.N. Murthy (2016), negotiates the soft power position for Telugu cinema rather to Hindi cinema, he writes, "Tollywood is in a strong position to vie with Bollywood for being considered India's flagship soft power asset"(362).

Telugu (vernacular language widely spoken in two South Indian states namely Telangana and Andhra Pradesh) is one the prominent and oldest languages of India. Telugu cinema started around 1921 with the first Telugu movie, 'Bhishma Pratigna' by Raghupathi Venkaiah Naidu. While the first talkie movie, *Savitri* (1933) is being made by East India Film Company and directed by the father of Telugu theatre movement, C. Pullaiah. Any way the first Telugu film with audible dialogue is *Bhakta Prahlada* (1931) and its first international appearance was in 1951 with the screening of *Malliswari* (1951) at Asia Pacific Film Festival.

Considering cinema as an extension of theatre, Telugu cinema initially began with the popular themes of the theatre, namely, mythological, folk and contemporary socio-political issues. These were the themes that dominated the Telugu theatre in pre as well as post independence times. Telugu cinema then was identified as a tool to spread the nationalism as observed by S. V. Srinivas in 'Politics of Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema'(2013). He writes,

By the early talkie era, which began in early 1930 in India, there was an elaboration of what I call mandate of the cinema in very clear terms. Those who gathered before the screen had to do so for a purpose which had to be demonstrated at the level of theme /content of films. The socials of the early 1930s and 1940s addressed the need to justify film making in terms of nationalist mobilization. [32]

Gradually the film makers began to understand the art of cinema making and the role of technology in film making, marking the beginning of experimentation which is both aesthetic and technical. Though technical advancements in film making made film makers more creative, a few things dominated film making as they have everlasting value and effect, one of them is ‘the exotic locations’. What began as an effort to show exotic locations has developed into a serious perspective on the Telugu diaspora living in other countries. Inquisitiveness about the lifestyle of the Telugu diaspora, visual treat of the exotic locations, the technological advancements of the west that make the life comfortable and luxurious, and the modern commodities are some more reasons for making Telugu cinema in foreign locations. America has attracted the attention of Tollywood as pointed by C.S.H.N. Murthy, ‘The Telugu diaspora connection with Tollywood dates back to 1960s when the early immigrants to US used to form associations or small groups to watch Telugu films brought from India by their kith and kin. By 1980s Telugu diaspora settled in US entered into film making, portraying the lives of Telugus living abroad (e.g. *Padamati Sandhyaragam*, 1987) (364)

Telugu diaspora across the globe

Approximately two million out of sixty million Telugus migrated to different countries. Their migration began much before the independence, during this period they migrated to Fiji, Singapore, Mauritius, Malaysia, and South Africa and later they began to immigrate to developed countries like Canada, Australia, Europe, USA, and New Zealand as skilled professionals. The result is, ‘today Telugus form largest South Indian community to have emigrated to different parts of the world, if the decedents of the nineteenth-and twentieth -century and the post-Independence emigrants, including the software professionals to the Americas and Europe are taken together’(93) writes Bhatt and Bhaskar(2007). They further analyze that the Telugu emigrants are of three categories, the first- the colonial emigrants as indentured and Kangani labour to the British and French colonies during the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. The second being the emigration of professionals such as doctors, engineers, scientists, and students to the developed countries such as US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and the third- the software professionals migrating countries like Europe and especially the US and Canada. Scrutinizing the preference of the country of migration by the Telugus in recent times, Bhatt and Bhasker write,

The most recent trend since 1990s is the wave of emigration of software professionals, especially to the US, following the demand for professionally skilled personnel in the high growth area of computer and information technology industry. It will not be an exaggeration to mention here that every young Telugu pursuing undergraduate education especially engineering and other technical fields, dream of destination US for higher studies & employment. [95]

According to a research report submitted by Maudi Henrik, titled, ‘Connecting India: Virtual and Real Linkages between Telugu Diaspora and their Home Region in Andhra Pradesh’ (2012), Telugu diaspora in America maintain continuous and effective connections with their

home land. Telugus are conventional and traditional south Indians and they revere their culture very much and so they did not encourage cultural transformations for a long time. Telugus began to get exposed to other cultures of the world through migration of its people to other countries. And they attempted to maintain their cultural identity as Telugus in their migrated lands. But the continuous rapport with other countries predominantly America is noteworthy in more than one expression, the most striking one being the cinema.

Image of America crated by Telugu Cinema

There are a considerable number of Telugu movies which deal with the relationship of Telugus with America. These movies can be basically divided into two categories, films whose place of action is America and films which deal with America but the locus of action is Telugu states. Again all movies whose place of action is America do not deal seriously with the relationship between Telugus and America. Movies like *Chinthkayala Ravi* (2008), *America Abbayi* (1987), *Anjali in America* (2005), *Shankarabharanam* (2017) along with a few more movies are filmed in America with no greater significance attached to the image of America. But all these movies have created what Arjun Appadurai calls, 'mediascape'.

Mediascapes refer to both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines. Television stations and film production studios), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media. These images involve many complicated inflections, depending on their mode (documentary or entertainment), their hardware (electronic or pre electronic), their audiences (local, national or transnational), and the interests of these who own and control them. [35]

The ethnoscape that the Telugu diaspora has created is an effective, dynamic and influential community in terms of culture flow from homeland to America and rarely from America to Telugu states. The mediascape of Telugu cinema with an image of America is interesting and reflects the ethnoscape of the Telugu diaspora in America. The mention of America in the very title of many of these films indicates that these movies are creating an image of America for Telugu viewers across the globe, especially those in the home states, they include *America Ammayi* (1976), *America Abbayi* (1987), *America Alludu* (1985), *America America* (1995), *Welcome America* (2014), *Atu America Itu India* (1999), and *Anjali in America* (2005).

Until 70s America was a not a very familiar place to Telugus, though a few doctors, engineers and scientists from Andhra Pradesh migrated to this country. Telugus did not allow significant cultural transactions between Telugu community in the home state with that in America owing to the fact that geographically they are located far from each other and the west was always treated with anathema by the Indians. And so, the image of America in the Telugu cinema that dealt with the creation of mediascape initially is that of the typical west as described by Indian literature. *America Ammayi* (American Woman, 1976) directed by Singeetam Srinivas Rao is one of the early Telugu cinema that exhibits the most accepted concept of east V/S west. Audience are introduced to this concept in the beginning of the film as the titles are displayed, through the locations (both Indian and American), dance forms (both classical South Indian and Western) and music (again Indian classical and western) of these places. *America Ammayi* is the story of a young Telugu man, Mohan (played by Sridhar) who goes to America and comes home along with his American wife, Nene (played by Anne). His parents do not accept the marriage and decline their entry into the home. Nene loves Indian culture and transforms herself as a Telugu woman, Meena (renamed by her husband). Meanwhile, Mohan's brother Anand (played by Ranganath) falls in love with Sudha (played by Deepa), both of them are fashionable youth of

India who ape the west in every aspect of their life. The film continues to illustrate the difference in the cultures of east and west and suggests that Americans have high esteem for Telugu/Indian culture through the character of Nene who is appreciated by her parents-in-law for being an authentic Telugu woman. Therefore the mediascape of Telugu cinema constructs a positive image of America as an inclusive nation with people who hold greater reverence for Telugu/Indian culture. This image continued in *America Abbayi (American Boy, 1987)*, *America Alludu (American Son-in-law, 1985)*, *Padmati Sandhyaragam (Song of the West, 1987)*. Discussing the impact of these mediascapes, Appadurai observes,

What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in their television, film and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapas to viewers throughout the world, in which world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed. [35]

Further, a few movies attempted to depict the life of the Telugu diaspora in America and negotiate with the Telugus in the Telugu states regarding the cultural tolerance of America. One such movie is *Padamati Sandhayaragam (Song of the West, 1987)* directed by Jandhyala Subramania Sastry, it also won Nandi (state level) award for best story and Filmfare best film award (Telugu). Majority of the action happens in the USA and so this is almost the first movie which attempts to appreciate the lifestyle of Telugus in America and at the same time creates a positive, culturally tolerant, inclusive convivial image of America to the Telugu viewers. This cinema portrays the life and culture shock of a conservative Telugu family after its migration to America. The film projects the description of the east and the west in terms of their cultural differences through the music, locales, cultural practices, and family relations. Sandhya (played by Vijaya Shanti), is the young daughter of Adinarayana (Gummaluri Shastry, who is much unwilling to migrate to America but for his brother's repeated request), falls in love with a young American, Chris (played by Thomas Jane). The concern shown by Chris towards Sandhya and her mother when they are supposed to return from a departmental store much before he falls in love with her, the warmth of Americans when Sandhya is taken to a party by her uncle, the fusion of music that Sandhya, Chris and Ronald (played by Shivamani) play, the tolerance of Adinarayana's colleagues and many more scenes attempt to reveal the liberal minded, tolerant and inclusive attitude of Americans. Finally Chris and Sandhya elope fearing that Adinarayana will not agree for their relationship and marriage. Adinarayana does not accept the marriage as expected, but Chris's parents welcome their relationship. The audience is informed about the humane character of Chris (an American) by Sandhya, while she is persuading their daughter, (who is brought up by Adinarayana in India) to accompany them to America. She speaks at length about the liberal minded (American) Chris who never attempted to convert her religion, or encouraged her to transform to be an American, instead respected her cultural identity and loved her Telugu identity. Therefore this film establishes the fact that, America is not only a land of opportunities, but liberal minded and open society that would respect other cultures and identities and hence suitable for Telugus. The cultural implication here is that, Telugus need not compromise their cultural identity.

If we can give authenticity to the comments in the website, it is not an exaggeration that one song in the movie, 'ee thurupu aa paschimam sangaminche e subha vela (the auspicious time when this east and that west are getting united) has motivated him to migrate to America and he writes, 'Yes. This song inspired me to come to US. Cant believe its been 25 years'. This is an appropriate illustration of what Appadurai identifies,

Mediascapes, whether produced by private or state interests tend to be image-centered narrative based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) as they help to constitute narratives of the other and proto narratives of possible lives, fantasies that could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement [35,36].

Therefore movies like *Padamati Sandhyaragam (Song of the West)* and *America Alludu (American Son-in-law)* created a positive image of USA and the mediascape they created became so influential that the number of migrants from Telugu states ever since 1990 augmented continuously.

Though movies like '*Dollar Dreams*(2000)', and *Atu America Itu India*(America on that side and India on this side, 2010) vehemently discourage the youth of Telugu states from going to America, they focus on the greater inclination of Telugu youths' migration to America. Albeit these movies do not convey that America is not a good place to migrate, they basically advocate Telugu youth to focus on the development of homeland. *Dollar Dreams* is the story of seven friends in Hyderabad who witness this American fervor among students from Hyderabad. Priyanka (played by Usha) is a young journalist who goes to different colleges and universities in Hyderabad to find out the career choices of youngsters observes that irrespective of their educational qualifications, professions they are practicing and their passion, a high majority of youngsters wish to migrate to America. This is not the reality of Hyderabad alone, as pointed by Bhat and Bhaskar, "Today, it is not surprising to find in the US one member, if not more, of each family among the people of coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh, enhancing the intensity of networks among the Telugus in the US and Andhra Pradesh(108)."

The image of America these movies have created deals with the Telugu diaspora, their living, their culture and their cultural challenges. As they deal with the professionals and their families who came to America, a land of opportunities. Along with the availability of immense commodities, infrastructural facilities and economic benefits, America is the liberal land which does not object or alarm the cultural identity that Telugus here maintain. On the other hand, America respects and appreciates the cultural identity of Telugus. The mediascapes so authentically create the image that

The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the farther away these audiences are from direct experience of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective some other imagined world. [35]

The third phase of the image created by the mediascape of Telugu cinema focuses on large number of Telugu students who are willing to migrate to America. As identified by Bhaskar and Bhatt, the Telugu youth contribute to a considerable size in the ethnoscape of Telugu diaspora in America after 2000. Their perspective of America is a little different from the first two categories of emigrants namely indentured labour and professionals and their families. Let us study the image of America created by the Telugu cinema from this perception. *Vennela (Moonlight, 2005)* directed by Deva Katta is the story of a group of Telugu youth who land in America for higher education. The movie begins with a conversation of a group of youngsters about the reason for deciding on going to America, and they cite the following reasons, availability of fashionable girls,

fame they can bring in, money they can earn, freedom to do anything and pollution free atmosphere. This phenomenon is the result of recent advancement in technologies, communication, information and the internet.

Pavani (Parvathi Melton) is a young, independent and modern woman who comes to America after she decides to end her relationship with her classmate Ritesh (played by Sharvanad) who indulges in alcohol, drugs and politics. After she comes to USA, she befriends Naveen(played by Raja) and works along with him in an Indian restaurant. Ritesh's friend and detractor Sayeed(played by Ravi Varma) also comes to USA and happens to encounter Pavani and attempts to create problems to her by calling Ritesh to USA. The locus for most of the action is USA, the film discusses the life of Indian students in terms of their struggles related to part time jobs, human relations in their community and treatment by fellow Americans. These students do not bother much with culture shock as they are aware of the place and its culture though various forms of interaction of these two communities, and they stay close to their homeland through internet. As observed by Maudi Heerink in his research report that Andhra Pradesh is the state from where huge number students are migrating to America and they are using ICT to stay connected to their homelands, he writes, "As computer professionals they spend a lot of time online for work, but many of these migrants are also actively creating online platforms to interact with other Telugu NRIs and with Telugus living in their home region "(22). Along with Telugu cinema, a lot of websites created by Telugu diaspora in USA create a mediascape making the image of America accessible to all Telugus across the globe.

Conclusion

As Benedict Anderson observes, "In fact all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined"(359). This imagination of the society is not restricted to any one context or by any specific person. The social imagery mentioned by Charles Taylor points out the image created for larger populations as he writes, "-- my focus is on the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and often this is not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories and legends"(23). This is shared by larger groups of people if not by the whole society. These imaginations vary with the time; the modern technology manifests the imaginations with greater clarity, visibility and authenticity. In the age of modern technology these images are created by television, cinema and other modern media as pointed by Arjun Appadurai. Therefore a keen scrutiny of these modern media would enable us comprehend the perspective of that community about an issue or ideology.

Hence, the imagined America created by the mediascape is manifested in the image they created through the Telugu cinema and made available to all the Telugus around the world. In the three stages of mediascape that the Telugu cinema has created the image of America and discussed the cultural implications involved. This image in all these stages authentically projects that America is a land of opportunities and liberal minded in allowing the Telugus to maintain and preserve their cultural identity. The cultural implications thus are very few and do not affect the cultural identity of the Telugus. The cultural implications of the mediascape (Telugu cinema) they created were evident through the study of these movies. And this image of America along with other factors encouraged migration of larger number of Telugus to the US, and as a result, Telugu diaspora has emerged as an influential and affluent ethnic minority by their visible presence in USA.

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