

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2021: Certificate of Merit

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Once Upon a Time for Today's Audience



This is a critical review of the Kannada cinema Ondanondu Kaladalli (Once Upon a Time), made in 1978 directed by Girish Karnad.

Ondanondu Kaladalli is the story of two brothers-warring feudal lords of the Nayaka tribe who have killed their older brother to divide the land equally between them. Each brother wants to establish himself as the Chief of the tribe. In the story, Gandugali, a mercenary warrior, is employed by the older brother to defeat the younger brother. He faces Permadi, an older but efficient and intelligent commander of the younger brother's army. The professional antagonism turns into personal rivalry as Permadi's son is killed and vows to salvage Permadi's reputation. In a turn of events, as a part of Permadi's vow, Gandugali joins Permadi in destroying the two chiefs and their lineage but with an injunction that Jayakeshi, the young son of the older brother held captive by the brother, more as a servant than as the eldest brother's son, who trusts Gandugali implicitly, and as a mark of respect for the fact that he has been fed in their home. Though Permadi refuses to comply with this demand when

Gandugali loses his life as the chief kills him at an opportune moment, Permadi renounces his anguish and his vow, leaving Jayakeshi unharmed to be the leader of the tribe. Permadi's moment of realisation is when he sees Jayakeshi mourning Gandugali's death. The narrative ends with the destruction of people who have supported and/or have been a part of the old feudal system.

There are sub-themes of masculinity, marital relationships, and the erotic, but the prominent theme explored is the paradox of the human psyche for material success and ego as they embark on the sublime in life.

From its inception, cinema has been a transnational phenomenon, be it for the technology (the know-how of shooting a film, montage, mise-en-scene etc.) or for the influence of the method of cinematic narratives (German expressionism, neo-realism, social realism, symbolist narratives etc.). In the hands of a genuine director from any geo-centre,

these technical aspects support the creative vision rooted in the socio-political, economic and cultural context/s the narrative is built to depict.



Ondanondu Kaladalli (Once Upon a Time) is inspired by, and a tribute to, Akira Kurosawa's classic *Seven Samurai*. Girish Karnad, the director, has acknowledged his indebtedness to this classic by Kurosawa. The influence is visible in the camera work and the costume design, hair styles-especially of Permadi and Gandugali as they knot their hair in a top-knot, much like the samurai warriors; however, the poetics of the narrative is much rooted in the socio-political and cultural milieu of Karnataka.

There are some visible similarities between the narratives of the two cinemas. Both are deeply rooted in the cultural vision of the directors. Set in the respective feudal society of the Middle Ages, they are re-contextualised in the contemporary world. They depict people who are keenly conscious of the spiritual dimensions of their experiences, willing to accept that dimension and act on it.

Set in the sixteenth-century feudal society, the *Seven Samurai* takes inspiration from Kurosawa's lineage. The warrior community of Samurai had the support of the emperor and belonged to the nobility. The cinema is as much about the farmers learning to tackle the problem of attack by dacoits who loot their harvest, a tribute to the service of the Samurais who were influenced by Zen spirituality, as it is about the power-mongering feudal lords' cruelty and their indifference to the plight of their people. The cinema captures the complex and complicated socio-economic situations with a touch of spirituality that

underlies all human situations, emphasising the indomitable spirit of the indigenous people.

Ondanondu Kalladalli is set in the context of the feudal society of the thirteenth century. The plot presents two brothers warring for supremacy over the land. The older brother employs Gandugali, a mercenary warrior who practices the ethics of the battles, to win the fight for him. Though Gandugali loses his life in this battle, he ensures that the young, to-be-chieftain-- Jayakeshi is not murdered. Ironically, his life is in danger for the ethics he practices and the lack of ethics of the feudal chief. From a different position, Permadi comprehends the futility of hatred, vengeance and any form of attachment to move towards self-realisation. The only scene when the two warring brothers come together sufficiently establishes the elder brother's egotistical nature and the younger brother's cruel nature that matches, the older brother's ego.

Unlike the *Seven Samurai*, which depicts and predicts a change as farmers assert and win their battle against the dacoits, *Ondanondu Kaladalli* points to a possible new system under Jayakeshi that could be benevolent, the spiritual growth of Permadi as he renounces his anger only after destroying the existing cruel, egotistical system led by the two brothers, their commander and their soldiers are killed. And unlike the pyrrhic sense of victory that the samurai feels in *Seven Samurai*, *Ondanondu Kaladalli*, despite the vast destruction, the final shot in which the camera pans to the expansive sky, and the capable Jayakeshi, who understands love and loyalty as he mourns the loss of a friend in Gandugali, possibly has learnt from his bitter experiences of the effect of the cruelty of his Uncle, leaves the audience with a ray of hope.

Alongside the theme of conflict, power, loyalty and renunciation, the cinema presents different facets and stages of the relationship between a man and a woman. Jayakeshi and Savantri as youngsters who are stepping into the world of man-woman relationships, the adult, erotic-dominated relationship between the commander of the army and his wife, and the older couple-Karpadi and his wife. In all three relationships, there is a sense of equality, a commitment, though not an ideal relationship, surely

a kind of old-world charm sustained throughout the narrative.

The theme of realising the futility of corporeal success is much explored in Indian literature, religious stories and mythologies. This combination of valour and spiritual awareness presents a remarkable opportunity to explore the most deep-rooted ambition of individuals in their struggle for economic power and social status that conflicts directly with the spiritual notions of human dignity and sacrifice. This theme emerges from the narrative of the cinema *Ondanondu Kaladalli*, but it never dominates the narrative. And this is the strength of the plot and the narrative, which is polyphonic, region-specific and postmodern with multiple centres at the same time. These aspects make the cinema a unique visual narrative that presents an aesthetic cinematic experience.



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