

Article

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Balagam: Barābar A Telangāna Sainmā!



Balagam (2023), directed by Venu Yeldandi

Introduction:

The term 'Telangāna' owns debatable origins viz. *Telangadh, Tilangani, Tulingana, Telinga,* and *Trilinga desha* as the three Shaivite Shrines (Shaiva Kshetrās) such as Kaleshwaram, Srisailam, and Drāksharāma were part of the united Andhra Pradesh. However, the formation of the 'Telangāna State' from Andhra Pradesh was an emotional moment in the history of Telangāna and India. The emotion, sentiment and bonding were there at the beginning of the Telangāna movement, and it has been continuing as it became a political element. Therefore, Telangāna is still *an emotional Telangāna* concerning their language (Telangāna Telugu dialect), culture and customs, etc.

Coming to Telugu cinema history, It was one of the reasons for the Telangāna movement that *Telangāna Telugu Dialect* has been confined to comedians and villains, and it became a trend from the early 90s to 2014. However, it was exceptional for the films based on the Telangāna movement. Credit must go to Shekhar Kammula as he made his films in *Telangāna Telugu Dialect*, such as *Fidaa (2017), Love Story (2021)* and accomplished success as they are commercial films. Nevertheless, the story of *Balagam (2023)* is entirely different as it has not made of massive stars, no commercial elements, no item song, no fights, and no lengthy and louder dialogues. However, *Balagam* achieved huge success at the box office. Then, it is a million-dollar question, i.e. who must get the actual credit for this success? Is it film director Venu Yeldandi or the Producers Harshith Reddy and Hanshitha Reddy, or Who else then? The answer to this question is *Telangāna and its culture and customs.*

Plot:

Gajula Komurayya (Sudhakar Reddy), an elderly and enthusiastic man, leads his rest of life with his elder son Ailayya (Kota Jayaram), daughter-in-law Swaroopa (Kommu Sujatha), and grandson Sayilu (Priyadarshi) while his younger son Gajula Mogilayya (Mime Madhu) lives in Surat with his wife Sujatha (Surabi Lalitha) and two daughters Veena and Vaani (Manaswini Gowd & Pavani). Sayilu's marriage has been fixed, and he plans to use his dowry of Rs 15 lakhs to pay his debts borrowed for doing business in his village. However, unfortunately, it was in vain as the marriage gets postponed and finally cancelled due to his grandpa Komurayya's sudden demise, which brought back his estranged daughter Lakshmi (Roopa Laxmi) was forced to be away from her maternal family for twenty years since her husband Narayana (Muralidhar Goud) had ego problems with her two brothers because of pretty issues in the relationship. Komurayya is cremated as per the Hindu traditions by his two sons. In order to perform the established customs after death, Narayana is requested by Komurayya's brother Anjayya (GV Babu) not to leave with his wife and daughter Sandhya (Kavya Kalyanram). Consequently, Sayilu visits Narayana's home with Sandhya to bring their clothes, where he learns that his uncle Narayana is wealthier with only one daughter; therefore, the coming son-in-law will get all the wealth. Sayilu, hereafter, tries to flatter Sandhya, but she doesn't care about him.

According to the rituals to be followed on the third day after death, the distinctive food items that the dead person likes must be offered to the crow, which presents on behalf of Komurayya's soul, and it has to eat and feel happy. But it doesn't happen when food is offered by his elder son Ailayya; in addition, he is humiliated by Narayana. Later, when Narayana, being a son-in-law, provides the same on the fifth day after death, the same scene is repeated, and he, in turn, is humiliated by Ailayya like *tit for tat*. Resulting in, Ailayya and Narayana holding each other's collars, and an exasperated Narayana leaves with his family. Subsequently, Narsi (Venu **Yeldandi**), a village tailor, feels responsible for Komurayya's death as he has jokingly wished for his death when Komurayya meets him just before his death and falls ill. In the village, the same happens to Shanthavva (Arunadevi) and Rajayya (Sathyanarayana). Sayilu and his friend Rajesh (Rachcha Ravi) pretend to argue with each other at the village centre, where his friend successfully makes all villagers believe that as Komurayya's soul has probably not satisfied with something, the crow did not eat food on both days is primarily causing all bad consequences in the villa. They make all have discussions on it. In view of this issue, the Sarpanch of the village invites Komurayya's family to the panchayat, where he, in the presence of the villagers, advice Ailayya, Mogilayya, and Narayana that they have to satisfy Komurayya's soul by fulfilling his desires on the eleventh day. If it is not done, they all will have to face the consequences of it viz, no association between the village and Komurayya's family. On the other hand, Sayilu takes all these consequences as an advantage and succeeds in bringing Narayana's family back to his home. Sandhya, by reciprocating his feelings, Sandhya asks Sayilu to for giving Grandpa's family back to her. Gradually, they both get closure and become friends. Ailayya starts remembering his affection towards his sister Lakshmi when Komurayya's sister Poshavva (V Vijayalakshmi) reveals the childhood days of Ailayya and Lakshmi to Sandhya. After Ailayya and Narayana reconcile with each other, one fine moment, Komurayya's brother Anjayya (GV Babu) brings a marriage proposal that Sayilu has to marry Sandhya. He says that it was the wish of Komurayya. Finally, Narayana accepts this proposal to rejuvenate his relationship with Ailayya.

Mogilayya's wife Sujatha objects to building Komurayya's grave under the peepul tree, which he likes more, as the land has to be sold to Mogilayya's brother-in-law, and advance has been taken already. When, again, arguments start between the two brothers, Komurayya's brother Anjayya reprimands them for not being bothered about their father but using his death for their selfishness. On the eleventh day, the entire family has an emotional epiphany while listening to Budaga Jangama Burrakatha [budʌgʌ dʒʌŋgʌmə burɾʌkʌθʱə]. Then,

Sayilu brought the twenty-year-old photo, which clicked right before Narayana and Ailayya had their arguments and was kept securely by Komurayya. Finally, crows eat the food, indicating that Komurayya's soul is satisfied and happy. The entire family finally gets reunited.

Balagam: From Ordinary to Extraordinary Success:

Every film, although an artistic element, must have its distinctive commercial elements to reach the target audience and get the capital and revenue. The major commercial element of every film is the starring combination, as the whole business runs based on this cast combination on the silver screen. Sometimes, a crazy cast combination will lead to a huge business and profit. On the other hand, risk factor also exists equivalently as several film woods have experienced this risk from the (though) great cast combinations. When regarding *Balagam*, reputed stars do not star all actors are not well well-established silver screen except Priyadarshi, who played Sayilu, the protagonist of the film, role. However, the cast combination is not great, but they are very good at coordination and competition in terms of performance. The setting, characters, names of the characters, customs, culture, attire, dialogue, dialectic dialogue delivery and belief systems present in the film pertain to the locale, viz. Sircilla and Telangāna. Therefore, the audience happens to get connected with the characters and travel with them with reference to their nostalgia. Indeed, it is an extraordinary reception by the audience to an ordinary film *Balagam*. The reason behind this great success is the locale (Telangāna) cultural elements, which transformed into commercial elements that led *Balagam* to reach its target audience. Therefore, the low budget (₹1.50 Crore Approximately) underrated film *Balagam* reached to all-time blockbuster and collected worldwide ₹ 26.55 Crores at the box office.

Balagam: A Visual Nostalgia:



Telangāna audiences are emotional and sentimental towards their culture and belief systems, and the same elements made other Telugu audiences receive *Balagam* well. In a nutshell, it mirrors the locale (Telangāna) culture, another element of its success all over the Telugu states. Moreover, behind all its success, a magnified feature is the film's central theme, i.e. Komurayya's death and conflicts in family and relationship due to

ego and pretty issues, which resemble people in the society. In addition, a magical element behind its success is the climax part led by 'Budaga Jangama Burrakatha', an oral narrative folk song by the couple Komuravva and Mogilayya, belong to the Warangal district of Telangāna. The couple happened to be in their transcendental world of singing and narrating the feelings of Komu rayya. It is an emotional singing wherein hearts touching words are used in it. They made the audience believe in the words spoken by the Soul of Komurayya from the other world (metaphysical world) through the medium of Komuravva and Mogilayya. Through their emotional singing tone, the couple could succeed in leading the audience into their nostalgia and memorising all of their past. Thus, the viewers self-realised regarding their mistakes towards their elders or family members. Therefore, it seems that an ordinary film received extraordinary success in the name of applause from people, academicians and critics. Beyond this, reintroducing the almost dead oral narrative folk cultures, i.e. Oggu Katha and Budaga Jangama Burrakatha, through the film deserves moral success.

Testimonials from the Viewers:

Here are a few YouTube comments @ testimonies about *Balagam* & its climax song:

1. *It is a great song which stimulates the emotions of a man; it has no language, no caste, no religion, and no regional difference. It is visible that the humidity in emotional feelings can stir everyone on the earth.*
2. *Balagam is not a cinema. It's a story of every home, a Story in every home. We imagine ourselves as long as we are watching it. In a word, it is not a story but the truth.*
3. *My father passed away recently, and when I listen to this song, I remember my father and feel vefeelad. The bond among parents, brothers and sisters is very well shown. If you don't mind, never alienate siblings, whatever the problems may arise. Miss yo,u dad.*
4. *I have watched the cinema and took my mom and dad to the cinema. In the middle, when I turned to my dad to tell him that wasm is crying, I noticed he was also crying a lot, it was a great cinema.*
5. *To the value of father, it has been given life with this song. Whoever watches this scene cannot stop crying. If they have real humanity and know the value of family, I wish to brothers to reunite.*

(Note: The above comments are English translations from Telugu)

Simple, but Superb Elements in *Balagam*:



Komurayya chitchat with farming labours



Komurayya dappu dance for village deity worship



A farmer carries plough by holding his two bullocks



Village women washing clothes; Children's play in stream;
A herd of goats & sheep drinking water in the brook

Apart from the representation of the culture and customs of Telangāna, particularly the united Karimnagar district, *Balagam* has incorporated certain simple but superb elements, which include i) **Central Theme:** a simple and straight theme, i.e. death of an elder (grandfather) of the family which connects to the viewers toward their personal life as death is an inevitable part of everyone's life and part and parcel of every family. The audience, on watching the film, happened to remember their grandpa and feel sad about how far they missed him! ii) **Linear (Almost) Plot:** The plot of the film goes in a linear sequence which makes the

coherence in the viewers except for a short flashback of why they (Ailayya and Narayana) quarrel each other?! In fact, the viewers can easily guess that something big conflict might have happened between the two. But, the short flashback reveals that they quarrel because of ego and pretty issues in the relationship that occurred in their past, which resembles the conflict in relationship real life. In addition, the viewers have received it well as they might have witnessed several such pretty incidents which made people mad of their ego and become lifelong rivals. **iii) Sympathetic tone:** The film has incorporated a sympathetic tone about the death of Komurayya thoroughly, Sayilu's struggles to clear his debts and unite his whole family, and crows which do not eat the offered food to Komurayya and so on. **iv) Oggukatha & Budaga Jangama Burrakatha:** Oggukatha [ɔggukʌθʱə], a traditional oral folklore singing culture of Telangāna, is organised as a cultural program during the first night after death which knocks and wakes up all the relationships in Mogilayya's family and perhaps the viewers' families. And the final episode, i.e. Budaga Jangama Burrakatha, makes the viewers, irrespective of gender and age, hold tears by remembering their family, elders and relationships and leading them towards their nostalgia. **v) Aesthetics of Village Culture:** The auteur has introduced Komurayya and his distinctive characteristics, viz. his agility and enthusiasm; kindness and elderliness; wittiness and prankishness; humorous and romantic attitude within an introductory song, 'Ooru Palleetooru'. In addition, the director, perhaps, has concentrated on the aesthetics of village culture as the film has been well visualised concerning the village and its culture, viz. sunrise in the village, the routine actions of the folks of the village in the early morning, viz. milking, rangoli, going to farms and getting warmth from cold fires and so on. In addition, cow and calf and their dance, milk vendor on the streets, bullock cart in farming, plough farming, farming labours and their chitchat during break time, Sufi fakir blessings by blowing holy smoke, clothes washing in the stream and children bathing (playing) in it, a herd of sheep and cattle drink water from the brook, worship of village deity, animal sacrifice, dappu (drum) dance, drinking palm wine (toddy) with palm leaves, flying kites by children, wife and husband fight on the street, Rachchabanda (meeting place), goalie games by children, gossips at the tea shop, children's funny dance, Hanuman temple, peepul tree, and Komurayya's enthusiastic, energetic and prank attitude and so on.

Verdict:

Nevertheless, beyond commercial thought, success does not always refer to money or profit at the box office. Still, it is all about the satisfaction of the filmmakers and viewers. Hopefully, it might have happened in both ends since *Balagam*, an Indian Telugu-language family drama embedded with family values, is the most watchable with all our family members, including 'Youngers and Elders', and it is considered one of the best films in recent times by the viewers and critics so that several international awards are at the threshold of *Balagam*, and it is the power of *Balagam*. Moreover, Telangāna State Film Development Corporation Limited (TSFDCL) has owned it as *Telangāna Cinema* and all the *Balagam* team members were honoured. Special shows of *Balagam* took place at several Telangāna Villages. Furthermore, *123 Telugu* stated that *Balagam* is a genuine attempt to explore human values and emotions without commercial masala. Its trump cards are the natural village (Telangāna) atmosphere, heart-warming performances, and gratifying emotional sequences. In contrast, Raghu Bandi of *The Indian Express* stated that *Balagam* is an honest slice of life story from rural Telangāna. Therefore, *Balagam* mirrors the culture and customs of Telangāna society. Hence, ***Balagam: Barābar A Telangāna Sainmā!*** Which means '*Balagam: Certainly A Telangāna Cinema*)

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