

Critique**S Viswanath****A Pulsating Pastoral Polyphony**

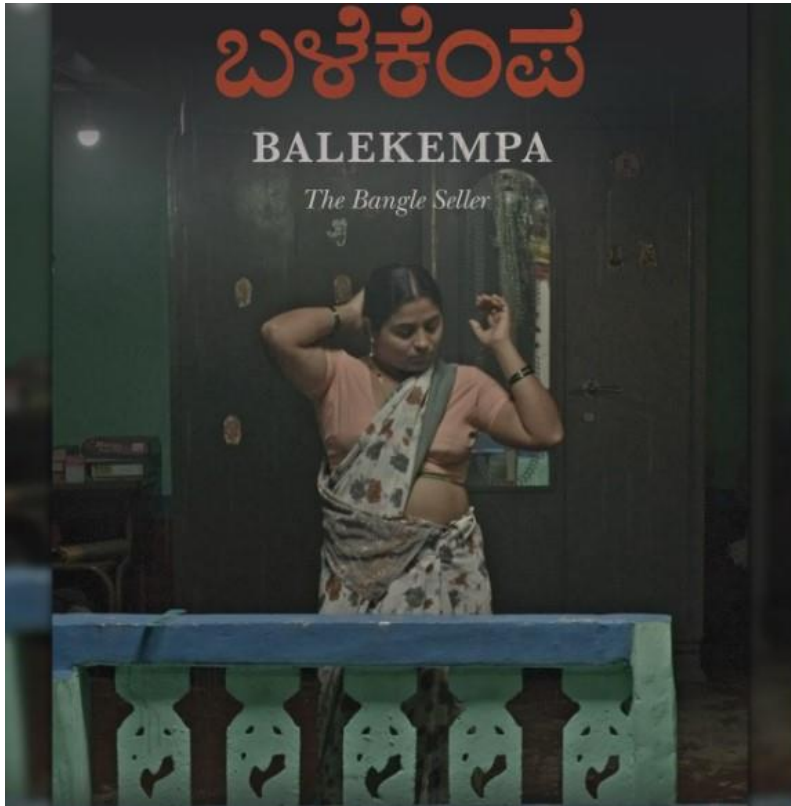
Unfortunately, Ere Gowda was caught in the maelstrom of the #MeToo movement and allegedly charged with “misdemeanour” with an intern. Ere Gowda, until then basking in the sunshine with a mentor–mate Raam Reddy’s *Thithi*’s stupendous success- silently disappeared from the public discourse after that.

But not before his 2018 debutant directorial film *Balekempa* (*The Bangle Seller*) won appreciation, fetching the film the coveted FIPRESI Jury Award at the International Film Festival Rotterdam – Netherlands. The laurel reading: “for its subtle and delightful portrayal of a universal theme against the background of a rich local culture.”

While *Balekempa* travelled to prominent film festivals across the globe, by the time it hit the Indian film festival circuits, it was whisked away, though announced, in the wake of the “serious allegations,” except finding favour at Dharamshala International Film Festival, held at McLeod Ganj, Himachal Pradesh, run by founders Ritu Sarin & Tenzing Sonam.

The tragedy, being the film, has since been virtually consigned to archival collection except occasionally lighting up screens at special screenings for invited audiences. Ere Gowda, who co-scripted *Thithi*, is now understood quietly giving shape to his sophomore film *Kaala Mele Iruve*, yet again exploring the slice of rural life in ancient Mysuru region, shot on location in Dodda Byadarahalli Village, Mandya District.

However, such has been the fate of *Balekempa*, as ironic as the film’s eponymous protagonist, that a mail to Vivek Gomber, the producer, for a possible screener link remained unsolicited. But fortuitously, for this film critic, he could access the film. Herein, then, are his impressions of the film.



At the pivot of *Balekempa* is Kempanna, as busy as a bee bangle seller. Impervious to the marital duties and the rumblings of his unrequited but dutiful wife, Kempanna matter-of-factly goes about his daily tasks, much to her chagrin. Her invalid mother-in-law compounded her misery, even while dutifully Kempanna tends and ministers to his ailing mother’s needs.

What covets one is that Ere Gowda beautifully captures

the contrasting dynamic situations of the couple through the visually vivacious camerawork by Saumyananda Sahi, who also doubles up as the film’s editor.

Virtually silent to a fault, which ensures the viewer is concentratedly invested in the goings-on as the couple go diligently about their mundane tasks, *Belekempa* is much more than the sum of its simple, pastoral tale.

Minimalist yet efficacious and evocative, the *mis en scene* creates the big picture of the languid village life and the couple’s existentialist existence, even as the underlying frisson of physical desire, especially Kempanna’s wife, and aching for conjugal companionship pulsatingly resonates on the periphery.

As to the consciously cold relationship that the Kempanna couple keeps amidst pretences of marital bliss, one learns through the villagers' familiar fodder of hearsay that the couple is still childless. Each person in the village whispers about this sorry state of affairs at Kempanna's household even while he is the most sought-after and wanted man among the village's women folk. A young widow even makes it bold to invite him for a dalliance. But the man sees least interested. He is therein lying a mysterious tale.

Soubhagya, the bangle seller's wife and her mother, however, diligently seek divine intervention to bless the couple with one; it makes sense dawn on the man to give more attention to his virtuous wife, even as Kempanna, cruelly impervious to his wife's wants goes about his routines in the most nonchalant, ineffable manner.

The irony of the existence of Kempanna and his wife Saubhagya is that while, as a bangle seller, he goes that extra mile to ensure his cosmetic wares adorn the hands and faces of women who flock around him, he is somewhat distant and goes about in icy matter-of-fact manner when it comes to understanding the needs and desires of his wife who aches for companionship and more so, to be blessed with the child.

The reasons for the state of affairs are not far to seek, which are all subtly and silently suggested through the various deftly structured and stitched visual play that takes place as the film progress at a slow, snail and languorous pace.

Balekempa is not just about the simple, silent, hardworking bangle seller. The other players that people the narrative lend their luminescence to light up the otherwise predictable, prosaic proceedings in the village and its inhabitants, who go about their daily tasks in regimental regularity. Be it taking the cattle for grazing, selling vegetables, or sitting in gossip as they respectfully help each other.

Wife Saubhagya, swallowing the bitterness of an inattentive husband, disinterested in marital obligations, her existence further stifled by the bedridden mother-in-law, bears the cross of her ill-fate thanks to the sexually awakening of the pesky teenage neighbour Mahesha.

He turns out to be her Man Friday and constant companion, always at her side though more to surreptitiously taste the touch of her flesh and ogle lasciviously at her voluptuous heaving bosom, giving into his first awakening of sexual stirring and be roused at every opportunity provides him.

He is always there willingly to lend a helping hand and fill her with the world's affairs through his smattering of English, cautioning her about the insurance agent more out of jealousy at the intrusion of another person into his privileged domain. He proudly proclaims he believes in social service, hence has taken up NCC, and would love to pursue it as a future choice in life, a convenient excuse to be beside her, making the most of Kempanna's absence.

Shorn of professional actors, as in the earlier assignation with *Thithi*. Ere Gowda turns *Balekempa* into a potent and poignant filial pastoral tale with that shrewd eye of a seasoned filmmaker.

Balekempa turns into a lyrical lament of a marriage gone sour due to the asexual attitude of the bangle seller, even as his wife thirsts for physical intimacy and consummation. We are given to witness how the simmering and suppressed desires wait to erupt like a molten volcano.

In sum, even as the enterprising and ensemble narrative vividly captures the vignettes of village life in all its vibrant detail, the film draws viewers subtly and sensuously into the interplay of human relationships, which forms the fulcrum of *Balekempa* and its resident deities all caught in the thrall of their individual destinies. Complementing the fluent and evocative cinematography of Sahi is the music score by the duo of Benedict Taylor and Naren Chandavarkar.

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