

RESISTANCE IN TELUGU POETRY: AN OVERVIEW

Dr. Nellutla Rajani

Asst. Professor, Dept. of Telugu, HOD Faculty of Arts

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, Telengana.

Literature and society walk together hand in hand. In fact, they are inter-wined with each other. Telugu literature, has evolved parallel to the sociological changes of every generation. Over the centuries Telugu literature has reflected the societal representation and resistance from time to time. My main focus, through this paper is to depict how Telugu literature reflected the changing times and affected social resistances during those times.

BEGINNING OF RESISTANCE IN TELUGU POETRY

Untill 11th Century AD, Telugu literature, and particularly Telugu poetry, traversed through the “Marga” system. Marga is a conventional method of literature which has certain boundaries, limitations based on “Gana” and “Yathi”. The Royalty were the lead characters of the poems and the predominant essence was romanticism. Path breaking poetry in Telugu came in 12th Century through Palkurki Somana (1160 to 1240).

According to literary experts, Somana was the first to introduce the concept of “dwipada chandassu” where the poem’s meaning could be derived in pairs of lines. While changing the subject from the royalty to common people, he even advocated a new philosophy that mythological characters need not be the core topics of poetry. Local legends became his main characters. One such gem is Basava Puranam, which explicitly depicted the socio, economic and political situation. This is the generation that introduced a revolutionary style of writings, which was also christened as “Shiva Kavi Yuga”. Basaveswara and Mallikarjuna Panditharadhya, who were instrumental in revival of Shivite cult have become the lead characters of Basava Puranam.

Shatakas and Keertans, which became popular in 15th Century AD have followed the same tradition. One such legendary saint poet is Tallapaka Annamacharya. Annamacharya (Mar 22, 1408 to April 4, 1503) has penned over 32,000 keertanas. The common people believe that these keertanas have brought Lord Venkateswara very near to them. Some of these keertanas reverberate through the Tirumala Hills, the famous abode of Lord Venkateswara, even today.

“Brahmamokkate Parabrahmamokkate” (God is universal and one) and “Ye kulajudanainaneme” (To which ever cast I belong to) were some of the gems from Annamacharya which defied the system and traditions of the era. The then ruler Saluva Narasinga Rayulu, who heard some of the romantic poems of the saint poet asked him to write poetry about him. But the saint poet turned him down saying “Narahari Keertana naanina Jihwa orula Nutimpabodu (the tongue which praised the Lord will not praise others).”

A special mention about Pothana, who also belonged to the 15th Century, should be made. He defied Kings and Kings' Courts. He dedicated his Bhagavatam to Lord Rama. "Immanujeswaradhamulakichi ninu ammanu Bharati" (I will not sell my work to the Kings, who are minions before you, the Lord). He went on to say, though I am a farmer, I will not sell my work to the kings to feed myself.

Dhoorjati, one of the 'Prabhanda poets' of the 16th Century without any inhibitions expressed his resentment and dislike to the kings. In his Kaalahastheeswara sathakam, he says... "rajul matthul, vari seva naraka prayam" (kings are strong-headed and service to them is hell.)

Vemana, the people's poet, in his shatakas, exposed the societies flaws and showed resistance towards the system.

The subsequent period has been considered "ksheena Yuga" in Telugu literature. After the Moghuls invaded South, Telugu literature passed through a lean phase. Even though, some literature existed, there was very little resistance about it.

REVIVAL OF TELUGU LITERATURE

Telugu literature has seen some revival during 18th Century. Modern poetry and modern literature reflected the then contemporary society and its political and sociological changes. Guarajaada Appa Rao (1862) is considered to be the father of modern poetry. He introduced new style poetry by amalgamation of old and new style of poetry. He also through his works advocated communal harmony and fought against social evils. He also stressed the need for patriotism.

The other notable path breaking works came through Gurram Jashua. In 1941, Gurram Jashua penned "Gabbilam" (The Bat). There were no Dalit movements until then. Dalits were also barred from temples. He lent his voice to the voiceless Dalits. The main character of his story is a bat, which no one likes to see or talk about. He softly but surely questions the existence of God, rebirth and fate. He asks God, "Please enlighten me on fate and why it is so revengeful". He questioned the traditional Hindu culture and he strongly condemned the inequalities that Dalits faced. He also wrote against untouchability in the society.

Even Devulapalli Krishna Sastry, who is known as the father of romantic poetry dared the then system by saying "sidhalayammuna shivudu ledoyi.. pranganamuna ghanta palakaledoyi" (Lord Shiva is no more in the ruined temple and the temple bells stopped ringing).

Chilakamarthi Lakshmi Narsimham through his poems painted how Hindus were crushed by the British rulers, who had been robbing the people of their rights, their earnings and their lives. The true translation of one of his poems goes thus: "My country is like a healthy cow... while the Hindus are crying like calves... the nasty white rulers are depriving the calves of their due share of milk".

Garimella Satyanarayana, who wrote of the national movement, said "makoddee telladoratanamu" (We do not want to be ruled by Whites).

PROGRESSIVE POETRY

Great Poet Sri Sri through his Mahaprasthanam, had changed the subjects of poetry in 1930s. He says a puppy, a match box and even a soap can be part of poetry. He shook Telugu literature with his racy and dynamic and no-inhibition style poetry. There was an unusual rhythm, style, experimentation and revolutionary thought process in his works. He himself said, “This century belongs to me”. Generation after generation of poets were influenced by his works. He says, poetry which was playing around in the skies shackled with traditions will be brought down to earth by him. Telugu literature is often divided into two periods, before and after Sri Sri. That was his influence on Telugu literature. The next generation took it from him after 50s and sailed with him.

The first to break the traditional vyakarana style of writing was Patthabhi. In his work called athmakatha, he says “with my verse, I will break the backs of traditional poetry. I will resent Chinnayasuri’s Balavyakarana and will follow new trend”. Being a follower of world famous Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, Patthabhi chose a revolutionary trend for his writings

Balagangadhar Tilak, a namesake of the freedom-fighter, a respected Telugu poet, in his Aartha Geetam (a song of pain) asks, “which civilization is this that cannot protect a small child?” He says, “My pride as a poet has vanished. Though, the country has attained independence and several reforms have been introduced, there is no much change in the lives of people. I am hanging my head in shame”. Thus he registers his protest and opposes the system.

Another author in the line was Mangipudi Venkata Sarma, reflecting social evils of the period he wrote “Balavitanthu Vilapam” (The cries of a child widow) and “Abala Vilapam” (Weeping Woman).

Madhunapanthlu Satyanarayana Sastry penned Andhra Puranam in which he recalled the story of Gunadyudu, who belonged to 1st Century AD. Gunadyudu, after toiling for seven years has penned “bruathkatha”, in local dialect and gave it to the then ruler Haaludu. Insulting the language used by Gunadyudu, the king refused to accept the work. Peeved over, Gunadyudu, confined his work of seven lakh poems to fire. On knowing about this, the king rushed to the author and saved some of the poems from getting burnt.

Sootha Puranam by Ramaswamy Choudhary is another form of resistance. Beginning a poem by praising the beloved Gods used to be the style of writing until then. But, Ramaswamy began his writings with reference to the Gods he liked and disliked. He started with a resentment and resistance. He questioned the style of poetry until then and the prevailing ills in the society. “Gods themselves are ridden with problems, how will they solve mine?” he asks.

Ismail, another writer in his work “Chettu Koolutunna Drushyam” exposed the unemployment issue way back in 1929.

But, the real shock treatment was “Digambara Kavithwam” (naked Poetry) in 1965. Modern Telugu poetry, which started off with Maha Kavi Guarajada has traversed through different

phases before it took a leap in the form of Digambara Kavayitram. It erased all boundaries, all traditions, all inhibitions. Though the country had attained independence, poverty remained the same. Inequalities continued to persist. With this line of thinking, a group of young poets started writing a new trend of poetry that exposed naked truths. The five young poets, with their pen names brought out a book and had it released by a rickshaw puller at midnight in the heart of Hyderabad. They claimed that they arrived as a storm while the district was still asleep. That is how, they registered their resistance to conventions. The style of resistance poetry grew by leaps and bounds ever since the national movement picked up. One of them who gave himself the pen name 'Nagnamuni' wrote 'Koyya Gurram' (The wooden horse) and openly exposed the failure of the state in case of the 1979 cyclone in Andhra Pradesh.

Progressive literature, mainly progressive poetry which took roots in 1950s has provided platform for resistance. Subsequently, it has moved in different directions but resistance remained the core issue.

REVOLUTIONARY POETRY

Then came revolutionary poetry in the 70s. From 1970 to 1980, the decade belonged to revolutionary poetry. It was during the emergency period that several poetry books like *March* and *Jhanjha* were banned. Revolutionary poets were jailed. Their poetry inspired a large section of youth and their writings became slogans for revolutionaries. On one hand, they fought with the system and on the other, they retained their identity and existence by publishing poetry of resistance.

“Kolimantukunnadi”(the furnace is on fire) by Cherabanda Raju, “Alalu”(waves) by Shivasagar, “Bhavishyath chitrapatam”(a portrait of future) by Vara Vara Rao were among the many notable and path-breaking revolutionary writers.

POST-MODERN POETRY

Feminist poetry, is an off-shoot of revolutionary poetry. Poet Vimala, in her poem *Vantillu*, questioned the age-old tradition of confining women to the kitchen and the web of restrictions woven around them. Highlighting the plight of women and questioning why none would understand the emotions and sentiments of women such writings were made- Kondepudi Nirmala with her poem, “Labour room” and Patibandla Rajani with her poem “Abortion Statement”. They have questioned gender bias and registered their protest like never before.

Unmasking manvaada in various theories and political practices dalit literature has begun constantly interrogating the dominant ideology. Dalit writers have come out openly and raised several questions on the plight of down trodden section. The notable among them are- Endluri Sudhakar for his *Kotta Gabbilam*(The New Bat) who said “Poetry is the secret skin of my community’s occupation”, Kalekuri Prasad, Vinodini, Gogu Shyamala, Paidi Tereshbabu. Minorities too raised their voice through their resistance poetry. Poets like Afsar, Yakoob, Mahejabeen, Vempalle Shareef made their mark. Poet Satish Chandar wrote ‘Panchama Vedam’.

HYDERABAD/ TELENGANA MOVEMENT

As Hyderabad state was under the rule of Nizam, Mudumbai Venkata Raghavacharyulu, who belonged to Andhra region had once said there were no Telugu poets in Hyderabad region. Pained over these comments, Suravaram Pratap Reddy researched into the topic and identified 354 poets from the region and brought out a book, “Golkonda Kavula Sanchika” with their works.

Dasaradhi Krishnamacharya, a prominent and genuine resistance poet said, “O Nizamu Pishachama, kaanaraadu ninu bolina rajuu... maakennadeni... teegalanu tempi agni lo dimpinaavu... naa telangana koti ratanaala veena”... (Devil Nizam, we don't find any king as low as you. You have burnt everything, but my Telangana is jewel studded veena). By then, rest of India attained Independence, but Hyderabad State was still under the rule of Nizam. Through his powerful literature, Dasaradhi raised his voice against the tyrant ruler.

A latest resistance poetry being on Telangana, its existence, its identity and its plight has become a part of poetry from the region. This led to a historic struggle which questioned exploitation by non-locals. Through their literary work, hundreds of writers created awareness among its people about the Telangana culture, its dialect and its fragrance, showing its commitment to struggle. Writers and their literature have played a significant role in creation of separate state for Telangana region. A few decades ago balladeer Gadar questioned the Nizam saying that the ruler is much tyrant than Nazis. Current generation of poets too picked up threads from there and through their writings exposed the plight of the region. Hundreds of poets have emerged in the scene and the base was either folk or the modern poetry and the revolutionary poetry path shown by earlier generation stalwarts. One of the prominent poet of this movement is Nandini Sidha Reddy who wrote the famous, “nageti chalalla naa telangana” which went on to become the war cry for telangana movement. Poets like Kaloji, Gorati Venkanna, Andesri and many more inspired the younger generations to join the struggle.

Beginning with 12th century, Telugu literature had been questioning the system, society, monarchy, rulers and their autocracy time and again. At the same time, Telugu literature protected its identity and its character. For the last nine centuries, Telugu literature has come up with new forms of resistance, raised its voice against the traditional thinking of each period. Folk literature, which was never in script has passed from one generation to another among the rural masses still keeping its fire alive.

It is truly difficult to take all the names, mention all forms of resistance poetry and how it influenced the society of that period. This brief accounts aims to reflect the strength of Telugu poetry, its identity and its contribution to the society.