Machhu Longu Kannada Cinema ("Hatchet, Long Sword" Kannada Cinema)

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Referring to her role in *Avva* (2008) in a television interview, Shruti, the actress, said: “Her sharp tongue itself is the *machhu, longu* in the film.” Her analogy affirms the wide popularity of what can be termed the Machhu Longu (ML) films in Kannada, all of which are set in the underworld. *Om*, the 1995 blockbuster, spawned a steady stream of ML films over the next decade, many of which became big hits. This short essay has been written with the following films in view: *Om* (1995), *AK-47* (1999), *Majestic* (2001), *Daasa* (2003), *Kariya* (2003), *Kalasipalya* (2004), *Jogi* (2005), and *Deadly Soma* (2005). All of them have met with commercial success. They deserve closer study as texts illustrative of the changing political morality in our times. Sidestepping questions of their directors’ intention, their artistic merit, and their social consequences, this essay attempts to identify a few of the specificities marking these films.

The city unfailingly appears a dark, unattractive and dangerous place in these films. All the films are set in Bengaluru except *AK-47*, which unfolds in Mumbai. In *AK-47*, Om Puri, a police sub-inspector, remarks: “This is Mumbai. Only the gun speaks here, not the tongue.” *Majestic* introduces Bengaluru as a place where “people make money in the name of God.” Graphic scenes of poverty recur in the ML films: children eat leftovers found in dustbins (*Majestic*), a mother prostitutes herself to afford medicine for her epileptic daughter (*Majestic*), the hero’s mother removes used plaintain leaves in a marriage choultry (*Daasa*). Scenes of the city’s underbelly also contribute to the dark atmosphere: slums, beggars, pimps, prostitutes, mutton shops, poultry farms, cow-sheds, tea, kabab and omelette carts, and autorickshaw-depots.

Stark and unromantic, these depictions of poverty and the city’s underbelly enhance the diversity of city images seen in cinema.

The degenerate urban situation is being exploited by politicians, police officers, businessmen and the goons. In short, the state and law have collapsed. Democracy is in a shambles and the state has little or no legitimacy left in it. In *Kalasipalya*, for instance, an MLA gloats that his power will let him...
win elections anywhere in the state, “. . . Dharwad or Davangere, Kamakshipalya or Kalasipalya.” And, the opening scene in Daasa shows the Deputy Chief Minister of Karnataka agreeing to give ten crores to the Indian Prime Minister in return for the Chief Ministership.

Morality survives, if at all, among the helpless, ordinary people struggling to make a living. The ML films commonly begin in the shadow of a near-total triumph of a corrupt system. Extraneous circumstances invariably pull the hero into taking up violence and turn him into an anti-hero. The anti-heroes exhibit virtues of honesty and fair-play amidst their violent efforts to carve domains of autonomous authority within an evil system. The violence of the anti-heroes, however, is ultimately not condoned in any of the films. Punishment awaits them in the form of death or life-imprisonment. Violent means of achieving the ends of social justice continue to be morally illegitimate in these films.

The strongest criticism of the ML films has concerned their gratuitous violence. The fight sequences have been taken to a new level of description here; they are bloody, gory and detailed in a way previously not seen in Kannada films. In Daasa, the hero pours acid on his opponent’s face and watches it with fascination while everyone around him start laughing. In Kariya, after the hero strikes a person dead in a cemetery, two of his friends start dancing saying they cannot help it. Such voyeuristic treats in violence are routine in the ML films. While a discussion of the ethics of representing violence is definitely in order here, we have to also recognize that loyal fans of the ML films isolate and compare violent fight sequences from different films in this genre. In other words, the styles of representing violence rather than their literalness are often at stake behind the fans’ appreciation. This aspect needs to be examined further.

An obvious feature of the ML films is the attempt to project a cool attitude. This attitude of cool, propped up by words like “metre,” “sketch,” “macha,” and “scope,” is about gandasattva (manliness). Explicitly invoked with reference to the necessity of courage and an easy resort to violence, the cool attitude in ML films also involves being rough with women. The anti-heroes of the ML films mark a clear departure from the long cherished image of the soft-natured Kannadiga that found its most powerful expression in the figure of Rajkumar.

Another dimension of the cool attitude is the strong embrace of an intolerant Kannada identity. In Daasa, the hero chops the arm of a Rajasthani seth, who is trying to buy an orphanage, and kills him: “If someone from a god-forsaken place like you can act big, how must I, who was born here and grew up drinking Kaveri water, act? If I let you alone, all of Karnataka will be insulted.” In Deadly Soma, the evil partner who cheats Soma’s father is a Telugu speaking Reddy. Marwaris and Hindi-speaking Muslims also figure as bad characters in some of these films. This casual endorsement of violent retribution contributes to, and is a reflection of, the growing linguistic anxieties in the state.

The ML films are on the wane and do not draw the crowds like before; their narrative structure seems to have grown tired. But the genre held sway for fifteen years. A moral dismissal of these films as crass and vulgar, this essay, I hope, makes clear, is to abdicate the serious task of examining them as texts of the evolving political-moral world around us.
After many moons I got to watch a simplistic movie with a realistic interpretation of the turmoil in middle-class families. It covers the entire vivisection of issues ranging from the dot com bust, to mutual funds racket, red-tape and corruption among politicians and the likes.

Madhu, in Bangalore and her brother Uday, in America get laid off simultaneously and ponder their next career move. Their careers collide in a dizzying maelstrom of political corruption, business fraud and failed familial expectations. This film glimpses the complex ramifications of the rise and stumble of the IT industry in Bangalore. It reveals the insidious nexus of state politics with global capital and traces the seemingly disparate relationship that the software industry has upon mutual fund schemes. Stumble teases out the interdependence of the co-operative bank sector and the liberalized economy. Consequently, the film explores the clandestine ways in which the most vulnerable sections of society in this case, rural farmers nourish the richest and most powerful people in the world. A failing software concern reinvents itself as a call center where again third world labor, in borrowed accents, services the first world consumer. Prakash Belawadi, the director, weaves these details into his narrative through an ironic critique. Belawadi clearly reveals the saturation of transnational capital, commodities, images, ideas, information and people in his (and my) beloved Bangalore. This unique moment in the city’s life captures the exuberance of a newly emergent middle class. But while many things have changed, many others stay the same. Madhu does not travel to the U.S. with the same ease as her brother. The color of her skin darkens her marriage prospects. The mere presence of a white man bolsters the confidence and diminishing morale of local bank officials. Stumble finishes the story that Bugaboo (1999) started a few years ago. Set in Silicon Valley, Bugaboo chronicles the boom of the dotcom era, seen through the eyes of a skeptical Indian software engineer. What happens when that software engineer gets laid off and scrambles B2B (back to Bangalore) after his American dream failed to deliver? While Belawadi responds to that question, he also poses several others. The film is eminently watchable, especially for the performances of Ashok Mandanna, Anant Nag, Mukyamantri Chandru and Suhasini. For being such a low budget film, the script and the dialogues were superb.

The entire package was delivered well, albeit amateurish. But full credits have to be given for the storyline and excellent execution. A true reflection of the present software scenario. A “Must See” for all those software professionals and their families. Candid Reflection of THE SOFTWARE ERA.

Suchitra film society organised a wonderful screening and conversation with the director. The film’s hero Balaji Manohar was also present to grace the occasion. It was amazing to see a film made in 2003 holds value even today.

The audience bombarded the director with questions after the screening. Questions like “Why a fairy tale ending for a such a realistic movie?” “Why was the movie made in English and not in local language?” “What is your next venture?”

One feels indebted to Suchitra Film Society for having constructed an intellectual bridge between the filmmaker and the audience.
Voices from the Waters (2009)

The fourth edition of Voices from the Waters (2009) will be conducted from 4th to 7th September in many auditoria in Bangalore so as to reach a more diverse audience. Bal Bhavan (for school children), MES College (college students), Alliance Francaise, Badami House, YMCA, Suchitra Film Society, Badami House (general audience). Details about screenings at Suchitra Film Society on 5th, 6th and 7th September 09 will be published in the next edition of ‘Appreciation’ and intimated by email.

Screenings for August 09

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<tr>
<td>12-08-09</td>
<td>6:45pm</td>
<td>Turtles can Fly</td>
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<td>13-08-09</td>
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<td>Cinema Paradiso</td>
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<td>14-08-09</td>
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<td>Rules of the Game</td>
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<td>16-08-08</td>
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<td>Tess of the D’Ubervilles</td>
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Suchitra Kala Kendra is organising a one and a half month theatre workshop for students beginning from 15th August 09. Timings: 6:30am to 9am. For details contact Suchitra office.

Editorial Committee of ‘Appreciation’: N.Shashidhara, M.R.Rakshith, Bhumika Rajan

Please Note: Films are subject to change or cancellation without notice. Suchitra cannot assure you the exact timings. Seats on first come first serve basis.