

Puttanna Kanagal as a Director of Women-Centric Themes in Kannada Films: With Special Reference to Gejjepooje, Sharapanjara, Edakallu Guddada Mele and Amrita Ghalige

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Abstract:

The Kannada film industry has a history of more than 90 years, beginning in 1925 with the silent (non-verbal) film Vasantha Sena, which was described as an “experiment of intellectuals.” After this, the Kannada film industry gradually grew and developed significantly. When we examine the history of women-centric themes in Kannada cinema, it becomes evident that this trend was prominently initiated by Sri Puttanna Kanagal in the early 1960s. This article examines four women-centric films—Gejjepooje, Sharapanjara, Edakallu Guddada Mele, and Amritha Ghalige—directed by Puttanna Kanagal. He was a renowned filmmaker in Sandalwood, and his films critically engaged with women-centric themes, addressing issues that were often considered social taboos. Through sensitive narration and psychological depth, Kanagal brought marginalized female experiences to the forefront of Kannada cinema.

Keywords: Kannada Cinema, Women-Centric Films, Puttanna Kanagal, Gender and Society, Social Taboos in Cinema

Introduction

Puttanna Kanagal, the legendary filmmaker of the Kannada film industry, made an immense contribution to Sandalwood through his distinctive cinematic vision. A review of the early history of Kannada cinema reveals that most narratives were predominantly constructed around male protagonists. However, from the 1960s onwards,

women-centric themes began to emerge significantly in Kannada cinema, and the major credit for this transformation goes to Sri Puttanna Kanagal.

Puttanna Kanagal was born on December 1, 1933, in Mysuru, to Ramaswamaiah and Subbamma. He came from a very poor family background and faced numerous hardships during his

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childhood. In his early career, he worked in various professions, including as a teacher, salesman, and even as a cleaner. His entry into the world of cinema began when he worked as a publicity assistant, which brought him closer to theatre and filmmaking. He later worked as an Assistant Director under B. R. Panthulu in the film *Ratnagiri Rahasya* (1957). Subsequently, he directed his first independent Kannada film, which later became a landmark in the history of Kannada cinema. The phrase “Puttanna – bellitereya kaduvyamohi” (Puttanna, the obsessive lover of the silver screen) aptly reflects his deep commitment to cinema. Among Kannada filmmakers, Puttanna Kanagal’s dedication and creative involvement stand out prominently. He was deeply rooted in the ethos of old Mysore and consistently attempted to reflect this cultural sensibility in his films. He predominantly chose stories adapted from Kannada novels and went on to direct 36 films, most of which were literary adaptations. The subjects of his films often dealt with socially tabooed issues, especially those related to women.

This article discusses some of his most legendary women-centric films: *Gejjepooje* (1970), *Sharapanjara* (1971), *Edakallu Guddada Mele* (1973), and *Amruthaghalige* (1984). These films created a significant impact and sensation in the Kannada film industry by foregrounding women’s experiences and challenging prevailing social norms.

Gejjepooje (1969)

Gejjepooje (1969), directed by Puttanna Kanagal, is one of the most significant films in the history of Kannada cinema. The film is based on a novel written by the renowned Kannada woman writer M. K. Indira. It was produced under the banner Chitra Jyoti by the Rashi Brothers, with music composed by Vijaya Bhaskar and lyrics penned by R. N. Jayagopal, Chi. Udaya Shankar, and Vijaya Narasimha. The cinematography was handled by S. V. Srikanth. The film starred Kalpana in the lead role, supported by Gangadhar and Leelavathi. *Gejjepooje* was made in the Kannada language and received widespread critical acclaim.

The film won several prestigious awards, including the Best Kannada Film at the 17th National Film Awards. At the Karnataka State Film Awards, it received honours for Best Film, Best Supporting Actress (Leelavathi), Best Screenplay (Puttanna Kanagal), Best Story (M. K. Indira), Best Dialogue (Navarathna Ram Rao), and Best Cinematography (S. V. Srikanth).

Thematically, *Gejjepooje* addresses a major social issue prevalent in South Indian society—the Devadasi system. The term “Devadasi” literally means “servant of God,” but in practice, women dedicated to temples were subjected to sexual exploitation under the guise of religious tradition. Although historically patronised during the Chola period, the system later evolved into a serious social evil. Through

this film, Puttanna Kanagal critically exposes the inhumanity and hypocrisy embedded in this practice.

The narrative follows the life of an educated young woman born into a Devadasi family. The film opens with a symbolic scene in which her mother plays the piano while a female infant cries beside her—foreshadowing the generational cycle of suffering. As the girl grows up, she completes her school and college education and expresses a desire to marry and lead a normal life. While her mother supports her aspirations, her grandmother strongly opposes them and insists that she continue the Devadasi tradition by performing Gejjepooja. During her college years, the protagonist falls in love with a fellow student who initially promises to marry her but later rejects her due to societal pressures and stigma.

Despite being educated and fully aware of the injustice of the system, the protagonist is ultimately unable to escape its oppressive grip. Disillusioned by society and betrayed by her lover, she is forced to confront the harsh reality that moral preaching often differs from social practice. The film ends tragically with her suicide, underscoring the devastating consequences of patriarchal traditions and social hypocrisy.

Through powerful performances, sensitive direction, and a socially conscious narrative, Gejjepooje marked a new era in women-centric themes in

Kannada cinema. The film brought national recognition to the Kannada film industry and established Puttanna Kanagal as a pioneering director who used cinema as a medium of social critique, especially in portraying women's oppression and resistance.

Sharapanjara (1971)

Sharapanjara (1971), meaning “Cage of Arrows,” is a landmark Kannada film directed by Puttanna Kanagal and produced by Vardhini Pictures. The film is based on the celebrated novel of the same name by the eminent Kannada writer Triveni. The music was composed by Vijaya Bhaskar, while the screenplay was jointly written by Triveni and Puttanna Kanagal. Cinematography was handled by D. V. Rajaram and editing by V. P. Krishna. The lyrics were penned by Da. Ra. Bendre, Kanagal Prabhakara Shastri, and Vijayanaarasimha. The film featured Kalpana and Gangadhar in the lead roles, supported by Leelavathi, Shivaram, K. S. Ashwath, and others.

Sharapanjara received wide critical acclaim and is regarded as one of the greatest films in the history of Kannada cinema. It won the Best Feature Film in Kannada at the 20th National Film Awards, the Filmfare Award South (1971) for Best Kannada Film, and the Karnataka State Film Award for Best Film. Kalpana received the Best Actress Award, and Puttanna Kanagal was honoured for Best Screenplay.

Puttanna Kanagal remained largely faithful to Triveni's novel, retaining much of the original dialogue and narrative structure, thereby preserving the literary richness of the source text. The film opens with a symbolic sequence of a government bus travelling along a national highway, where Kaveri (Kalpana) sits opposite Satish (Gangadhar). A simple moment—Kaveri sharing an orange and Satish playfully pretending that its juice has entered his eyes—sets the tone for their emotional intimacy. The two later attend a wedding ceremony, gradually fall in love, and marry with the consent of their families.

Kaveri is portrayed as an educated, refined, and sensitive woman from a middle-class background, while Satish belongs to a wealthy family and is equally educated and sophisticated. Their marital life begins happily; they have a son, build a house, and appear socially successful. However, when Kaveri conceives for the second time, she begins to suffer from severe psychological distress. It is revealed that she had been sexually exploited by a relative during her college days, an unresolved trauma that deeply affects her mental health. As her condition worsens, she is admitted to a neurological centre for treatment.

During this period, Satish becomes emotionally alienated and begins a post-marital relationship with his office stenographer. This betrayal further destabilizes Kaveri, eventually forcing her to return permanently to the psychiatric

institution. The film thus powerfully depicts not only a woman's psychological suffering but also the patriarchal insensitivity and male ego that aggravate her condition.

Sharapanjara foregrounds two critical themes: women's mental health and the unequal moral standards applied to men and women in society. Puttanna Kanagal sensitively exposes how a woman's trauma is magnified by social judgment, while male transgressions are normalized or ignored. The film was shot in the outskirts of Mysuru and Coorg, lending a naturalistic and serene visual texture that contrasts sharply with the protagonist's inner turmoil.

Kalpana's performance is widely regarded as one of the finest in Indian cinema. Her portrayal transitions seamlessly from a cheerful housewife to a psychologically tormented woman, marked by extraordinary emotional depth. Actress Sharmila Tagore reportedly remarked after watching the film, "*Aa pātravanṇu ashte channāgi māḍalu sādhyā āguttō illavō?*"—questioning whether it was even possible to perform such a role with that level of authenticity.

Sharapanjara was one of the earliest Kannada films to openly address women's psychological problems in a public and empathetic manner. Its impact was profound, prompting audiences to question gender discrimination and societal hypocrisy. More importantly, the film gave confidence to women suffering

from psychological distress, encouraging greater acceptance of psychiatric treatment. Through *Sharapanjara*, Puttanna Kanagal reaffirmed cinema as a powerful medium for social awareness and gender-sensitive discourse.

Edakallu Guddada Mele (1973)

Edakallu Guddada Mele (1973) is another iconic film in the history of Kannada cinema, directed by Puttanna Kanagal. The film is based on a novel written by Bharathisuta, which was first published as a serial in the Kannada weekly magazine *Sudha*. Direction and screenplay were handled by Puttanna Kanagal, while the film was produced by Srikanth Nahata and Srikanth Patel. Cinematography was by S. V. Srikanth, and editing was carried out by S. P. N. Krishna and T. P. Velayudham. The music was composed by M. Ranga Rao, with lyrics written by R. N. Jayagopal, Kanagal Prabhakara Shastri, Vijaya Naarasimha, and M. Narendra. The film was made in the Kannada language and starred Jayanthi, Aarathi, Tomato Chandrasekhar, and Ranga in prominent roles.

The film received critical acclaim and won the Karnataka State Award for Best Film, while Jayanthi received the Best Actress Award for her powerful performance.

Edakallu Guddada Mele is significant for being one of the earliest Kannada films to openly address the taboo subject of a married woman's unfulfilled sexual desire and the forced nature of post-

marital repression. The narrative explores the emotional and physical needs of a woman whose expectations remain unmet due to her husband's physical disability. The story draws inspiration from D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, though it is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context of Karnataka.

The film revolves around Kumara (Ranga), a retired military officer who loses his leg during the war with Japan. Prior to his injury, he marries Madhavi (Jayanthi), a young and beautiful woman. After the war, Kumara returns home disabled and openly communicates his physical limitations to Madhavi. Demonstrating loyalty and sacrifice, Madhavi initially resolves to live with her husband without any personal expectations or desires.

The narrative takes a turn with the entry of Nanjunda (Tomato Chandrasekhar), a young man who becomes attracted to Madhavi. Gradually, Madhavi also develops feelings for him. In the absence of her husband, Madhavi and Nanjunda visit a rocky hill area near their estate, known as *Edakallu Betta*, where they enter into a sexual relationship. Overwhelmed by guilt, Madhavi struggles with moral conflict and emotional distress.

The arrival of Madhavi's sister, Devaki (Aarathi), further complicates the situation. Nanjunda begins to show interest in Devaki, which deeply hurts Madhavi and intensifies her sense of

betrayal. Devaki eventually becomes suspicious and uncovers the secret relationship between Madhavi and Nanjunda.

Puttanna Kanagal made a significant departure from the original novel's ending. While the novel concludes with Madhavi and Nanjunda accidentally falling to their deaths from the rocky hill, the film presents a more psychologically intense resolution: Madhavi commits suicide by shooting herself, and Nanjunda dies in a motorcycle accident. This altered ending reinforces the tragic consequences of societal repression and moral judgment imposed on women.

Jayanthi's performance was widely appreciated for its emotional depth and restraint, earning her the Karnataka State Best Actress Award. The film marked a turning point in Kannada cinema by introducing a new class of audiences willing to engage with serious, realistic, and women-centric narratives. Initially, such themes were considered unacceptable by mainstream audiences, but *Edakallu Guddada Mele* played a crucial role in gradually transforming audience sensibilities.

This transformation is largely credited to Puttanna Kanagal, who courageously introduced unconventional themes and shifted audience focus from star-centric entertainment to content-driven cinema. Following this film, viewers increasingly associated Kannada cinema with meaningful storytelling and bold

direction, reinforcing Puttanna Kanagal's reputation as a pioneer of women-centric and socially relevant filmmaking.

Amrutha Ghalige (1984)

Amrutha Ghalige (1984), meaning "Auspicious Moment," is a Kannada romantic drama film directed by Puttanna Kanagal and based on the novel *Avadhaana* by Dodderi Venkatagiri Rao. The film was produced by S. R. Rajan, Bhima Rao, K. Nagaratna, and Puttanna Kanagal. Cinematography was handled by B. S. Basavaraj, editing by V. P. Krishna, and music composed by Vijaya Bhaskar, with lyrics written by Vijaya Narasimha. The film starred Ramakrishna, Padmavasanthi, and Sridhar in the lead roles.

The film received critical acclaim and won several Karnataka State Film Awards for the year 1983–84, including Best Screenplay (Puttanna Kanagal), Best Cinematography (B. S. Basavaraj), and Best Editing (V. P. Krishna).

Thematically, *Amrutha Ghalige* addresses the sensitive and socially taboo issue of teenage pregnancy, a topic that was rarely discussed openly in Indian cinema during the 1980s. While teenage pregnancy has become more openly acknowledged in contemporary society, it was considered a serious moral and social stigma during the 1980s and 1990s. By choosing this subject, Puttanna Kanagal once again demonstrated his courage and commitment to women-centric storytelling.

The narrative begins with Renuka (Padmavasanthi), Manu (Ramakrishna), and Madhu (Sridhar), who are classmates. Manu belongs to a wealthy family, whereas Renuka and Madhu come from economically weaker backgrounds. Despite their social differences, Manu and Renuka fall in love and engage in a pre-marital sexual relationship, resulting in Renuka's pregnancy. Unaware of this development, Manu leaves for Pondicherry to pursue higher studies. During his absence, he is misled by his sister into believing that Renuka and Madhu are in a relationship, prompting him to refuse marriage.

Faced with social pressure and limited options, Renuka marries Madhu to conceal her pregnancy. Tragically, Madhu suffers from a serious illness and dies shortly after Renuka gives birth to a son. Renuka is left to lead a difficult life as a single mother, burdened by societal judgment and emotional loss.

The narrative takes a turn when Manu learns the truth through a letter written by Madhu before his death. Realizing his mistake, Manu returns, accepts responsibility, marries Renuka, and the film concludes with the formation of a socially accepted family structure.

Through *Amrutha Ghalige*, Puttanna Kanagal explores the moral complexities surrounding teenage pregnancy, premarital relationships, and women's vulnerability within rigid social frameworks. The film reinforces its

women-centric perspective by focusing on Renuka's suffering, resilience, and social marginalization rather than moral condemnation. Directing such a film posed a significant challenge, as audiences of the time were hesitant to accept such bold themes on screen. Nevertheless, Puttanna Kanagal daringly presented the narrative with sensitivity and realism, earning widespread recognition.

The film also played a crucial role in introducing new talent to Kannada cinema, including Ramakrishna, Padmavasanthi, and Sridhar. Additionally, the noted playback singer B. R. Chaya was introduced through this film. *Amrutha Ghalige* thus stands as another significant milestone in Puttanna Kanagal's legacy of women-centric and socially conscious filmmaking.

Conclusion

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Kannada film industry underwent a significant transformation, gradually moving away from mythological and historical narratives towards socially relevant and realistic themes. In this period of transition, Puttanna Kanagal emerged as a pioneering filmmaker who introduced a new wave in Kannada cinema. Through his bold experimentation, he brought socially taboo subjects into the public discourse, using cinema as a medium of social critique and awareness. Puttanna Kanagal's films courageously addressed issues such as prostitution, women's

mental health, forced post-marital sexual repression, and teenage pregnancy—subjects that were rarely discussed openly in Indian society at the time. These themes, collectively categorized as women-centric, highlighted the lived realities, vulnerabilities, and struggles of women within a patriarchal social structure. By foregrounding women's experiences, Kanagal challenged conventional cinematic norms and expanded the narrative possibilities of Kannada cinema.

His directorial style was equally innovative. By choosing to shoot extensively in natural locations and the outskirts of towns, Kanagal enhanced the realism and emotional depth of his films. He also played a crucial role in introducing and nurturing new talent in the Kannada film industry, launching or strengthening the careers of several notable actors such as Vishnuvardhan, Ambareesh, Ramakrishna, Aarathi, Shivaram, Kalpana, and Leelavathi. Moreover, his adaptations of literary works helped bring prominent Kannada women writers like Triveni, M. K. Indira, and Vani into the cinematic mainstream, thereby creating a strong dialogue between literature and cinema. Puttanna Kanagal is also remembered as a pioneer in the aesthetic picturization of songs, integrating music meaningfully into the narrative rather than using it merely as entertainment. Although his films were often criticized for being “too women-centric,” Kanagal firmly rejected such

notions, believing that highlighting women's issues was not a bias but a necessity for social reflection. His legacy continues to influence Kannada cinema, reaffirming the power of film as a tool for social change and gender-sensitive storytelling.

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