

Devadasu (1953) – A Film Classic

If someone asks me to pick just one movie in Telugu that is outstanding in every aspect, I probably will select “Devadasu” made in 1953. This is one great movie. Once you experience it you’ll never forget it for the rest of your life. It is that deeply affecting.

There were many Bengali stories made into very successful Telugu movies. But “Devadasu” is definitely a standout. Most of Sharat Chandraji’s novels were translated into Telugu. This was done by various authors. But a standout among these is the translation done by Aluri Subba Rao. He was also popularly known as Chakrapani. He was also a partner of Vijaya movies who made so many great movies over the years as the team Nagi Reddi-Chakrapani. Many people know him as the editor of the children’s magazine called “Chandamama” which was published in various languages. He was also the editor of the monthly magazine called “Yuva” in Telugu. In this magazine, he published most of Sharat’s novels translated in Telugu as serials. They had a huge following. One beautiful thing about these translations was that Chakrapani changed the setting to Telugu from Bengali. He renamed some characters but retained most of the originals intact. Telugu “Devadasu” was based on Chakrapani’s translation.

It is surprising to know that the outfit that made the movie “Devadasu” was a relatively new one. D.L. Narayana, producer of the film, was a long time assistant at Bharani Studios and was there with them during their early movies, including classics like “Laila Majnu (1949)”. He wanted to make “Devadasu” badly. To get backing for his project, he made another movie called “Stree Saahasam (1951)”, which was his maiden venture as a producer. This movie starred Anjali and Akkineni Nageswara Rao (ANR). It was a female oriented movie, and it turned out to be a box office bonanza for DL.

With the cash in hand, DL ventured out to make “Devadasu” in both Telugu and Tamil starting in late 1951. He recruited Vedantam Raghavayya to direct the movie. He signed C.R. Subbaraman, with whom he worked in “Laila Majnu”, to provide the music. He cast ANR for the role of Devadasu and Janaki for the role of Parvati. The movie went into production and Subbaraman composed music for all 10 songs and recorded nine of them.

But when he was only 29 years old, Subbaraman passed away. The tenth song was completed by his assistants Viswanthan & Rama Murthy. Mystery shrouded around the death of the brilliant Subbaraman and there were many rumors about how he died. With the morale of the crew down, DL decided to shelve the project, at least temporarily.



Poster of "Devadasu"

DL went onto make another movie in 1952 called "Shanthi" in which a new actress, who appeared in "Samsaram" in a bit role before, and few other movies, had a major supporting role. Her name was Savithri. In 1953, when DL decided to resume his activities with "Devadasu", Janaki was no longer available as she was committed to several other movies. DL, in a very bold step, decided to cast Savithri, a relatively newcomer, as Parvati. Savithri appeared as an extra for the first time in a movie called "Samsaram" in 1950. After that she had acted in bit roles to small supporting roles in

"Pathala Bhairavi (1951)", "Roopavathi (1951)", "Aadarsham (1952)", "Palletooru (1952)", "Priyuralu (1952)", "Shanthi (1952)", "Pelli Chesi Choodu (1952)", "Sankranthi (1952)", and "Brathuku Theruvu (1953)". But with the role of Parvati, Savithri was arrived. For next two plus decades she ruled Telugu cinema like no other actress before her, or since then. Granted this was ANR's movie all the way. But Savithri, one of the greatest actresses of our time, frame for frame was also unforgettable in her portrayal of Parvati.

Stories were written how ANR prepared for the role. Not of a big physique, to look very lean and pale ANR fasted for several weeks. Stories abounded that he couldn't even walk without much help. The shooting went on for nearly two months where ANR is shown as a drunkard. Also, apparently all scenes where ANR appears as a drunkard were shot during the nights. ANR told reporters few years back reminiscing how his "Devadasu" was made that the director kept him awake all night to have that special effect of giving a droopy, drunken, and melancholic look. No wonder even Dilip Kumar went on record to congratulate ANR for such a superb acting.

There was a scene in the movie where Parvati bangs her head against a door. While shooting this scene, it was reported that Savithri was so involved in her role that she started banging her head in earnest. By the time Raghavayya, the director, realized it and grabbed her away from the door, her forehead was apparently soaked in blood.

Director Raghavayya had a super cameraman working for him. His name was B.S. Ranga. Ranga later turned a producer and made several noteworthy movies ("Amara Shilpi Jakkanna" and "Thenali Rama Krishna"). The picturization of some of the songs leaves one with the impression that may be someone like Guru Dutt was at work. But Guru's "Pyaasa" came four years later than this "Devadasu". Especially the picturization of two songs are worth mentioning. The song "Kala Idani" was picturized in a room with ANR having a glass in his half raised left hand. The only light into the room is through the window to his back. With part of the light shining on the desk next to where ANR is sitting, this becomes a memorable scene. The second scene is the song "Jagame Maaya".



Pictures of Savithri in despair in "Devadasu"

We come to the songs of the film. Some of the greatest songs sung by Ghantasala are in this movie. He had four solos and two duets in the movie.

People still remember fondly his solos, especially the songs "Jagame Maaya", "Kala Idani", and "Kudi Edamaite". Much of the success of the movie also owes in part due to the popularity of these songs that are as good as gold even today. It was said that to sing "Jagame Maaya", Ghantasala apparently went on a fast for few weeks (by some reports 41 days, that is almost six weeks!) to give that splendid hair raising experience. The immeasurable pathos, the unending despair, the immense hopelessness, the heart rendering grief, and the intense helplessness all these emerge in his voice as expressed by ANR superbly on the screen. The song, the scene where ANR has a glass of liquor in his hand, sitting under the lamp in a lonely street in the middle of a night, with a stray dog giving him a vigil is just heartbreaking. This stunning scene itself is one of the landmark moments in the Telugu film history.

The rich lyrics were written by Samudrala Sr. But there are some people who are of the opinion that some of the songs were written by Malladi Rama Krishna Shastri. May be. Or may be not. But the fact remains that these songs are rich in meaning and they affect you deeply as the movie itself.

A viewing of this movie gives such a deep satisfaction that you indeed watched a classic that sparkles like a many faceted diamond. The experience in the end hopelessly consumes with so much grief for the love lost and the lives wasted...