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DEGRADATION OF THE STATUS OF TELUGU TEACHERS AND LECTURERS IN TELUGU CINEMA: A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS, PROFESSIONAL DIGNITY, AND SOCIAL VALUES

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Abstract: *Teachers have traditionally occupied a respected position in Indian society as transmitters of knowledge, language, culture, and moral values. Telugu cinema has reflected this social recognition through films that portray teachers as disciplined, principled, and socially responsible individuals. However, certain cinematic representations have also presented teachers and lecturers as objects of ridicule, romantic interest, comedy, or subordinate characters whose professional identity receives limited attention. This article critically examines the changing representation of Telugu teachers and lecturers in Telugu-language cinema, with particular reference to their professional dignity, linguistic identity, authority, and relationship with students. Films such as Missamma (1955), Badi Panthulu (1972), Sundarakanda (1992), Master (1997), Tagore (2003), and Sir (2023) provide useful points of comparison for understanding different cinematic approaches to education and the teaching profession. The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive method based on selected films and secondary sources. It argues that the representation of teachers is not uniformly negative; rather, Telugu cinema presents competing images of the teacher as a respected mentor, a comic figure, a romantic character, a social reformer, and a critic of educational inequality. The article emphasizes the need for more realistic and dignified representations of Telugu language teachers and lecturers.*

Keywords: *Telugu cinema, Telugu teachers, lecturers, professional dignity, teacher representation, Telugu language, educational values, popular culture*.

Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role in the intellectual, cultural, linguistic, and social development of individuals. Teachers and lecturers are central to this process because they not only impart knowledge but also develop critical thinking, communication skills, ethical values, and cultural awareness among students. In Indian tradition, the teacher has often been associated with the ideals of the *guru*, whose responsibility extends beyond classroom instruction to the formation of responsible citizens.

Telugu teachers occupy a particularly important position in preserving and promoting the Telugu language, literature, history, and cultural heritage. Their work includes teaching grammar, poetry, prose, literary criticism, and the historical development of the language. Telugu lecturers in colleges and universities also contribute to research, literary scholarship, translation, and the preservation of regional cultural knowledge.

Cinema, as a powerful medium of mass communication, influences how professions and social relationships are imagined. Telugu cinema has depicted teachers in several different ways, ranging from respected educators to comic characters and individuals whose personal relationships overshadow their professional responsibilities. Films such as *Badi Panthulu* represent the teacher as a figure of sacrifice and moral commitment, while *Sundarakanda* introduces a romantic-comedy framework involving a college

lecturer and a student. Other films use the teacher as a vehicle for discussing educational inequality, institutional corruption, and social reform.

The central concern of this article is whether the changing portrayal of teachers and lecturers in Telugu cinema has weakened the public image of the teaching profession, particularly that of Telugu language educators. The term *degradation* is used here to describe a perceived decline in the dignity or seriousness accorded to teachers in particular cinematic representations. It does not imply that every Telugu film portrays teachers negatively or that cinema alone is responsible for any actual decline in their social status.

Statement of the Problem

In contemporary popular culture, professional status is frequently associated with income, social influence, institutional power, and public visibility. Teaching, despite its educational and cultural importance, may receive less attention than professions associated with wealth, political authority, business success, or technological advancement.

Within cinema, teachers and lecturers sometimes appear primarily as supporting characters rather than as complex individuals with intellectual, emotional, and professional lives. Their classroom authority may be weakened for comic effect, their personal lives may dominate their characterization, or their professional expertise may be reduced to a device for advancing the protagonist's story.

These tendencies raise several questions. Are teachers portrayed as knowledgeable and socially responsible professionals, or are they frequently reduced to stereotypes? Does Telugu cinema give adequate recognition to Telugu language teachers and lecturers? How do romantic, comic, commercial, and reform-oriented narratives shape the audience's understanding of the teaching profession?

The problem is therefore not simply the presence of humour or romance in films. It is the possibility that repeated, one-dimensional representations may obscure the intellectual contribution, professional responsibilities, and social importance of teachers.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the representation of teachers and lecturers in selected Telugu films.
2. To compare earlier and later cinematic portrayals of the teaching profession.
3. To identify representations that may diminish teachers' professional dignity and social authority.
4. To examine how Telugu language, literature, and cultural identity are represented through teacher characters.
5. To analyse the relationship between commercial cinema, humour, romance, hero-centred narratives, and teacher representation.
6. To suggest ways of promoting realistic and respectful representations of Telugu teachers and lecturers.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How has the representation of teachers and lecturers changed across selected periods of Telugu cinema?
2. What differences can be observed between idealized teacher characters and characters presented primarily for comedy or romance?

3. How are Telugu language teachers and lecturers distinguished from teachers of other subjects in cinematic narratives?
4. What aspects of professional dignity, classroom authority, and teacher–student relationships receive attention in these films?
5. Can cinema contribute to a more informed public understanding of teachers and their social responsibilities?

Review of Literature

Research on Indian cinema demonstrates that films do more than entertain; they also construct images of social groups, institutions, languages, and professions. S. V. Srinivas's study, "Cardboard Monuments: City, Language and 'Nation' in Contemporary Telugu Cinema," examines how Telugu films represent urban space, language, and social belonging. Although the article does not focus specifically on teachers, it provides a useful framework for understanding how language and cultural identity are constructed through cinematic narratives.

Studies of social representation in Telugu cinema have also examined the relationship between screen characters, caste, power, and dominant cultural values. Such research encourages an analysis of film characters not as isolated individuals but as products of broader social and ideological structures.

Popular discussions of teacher-centred Telugu films identify works such as *Badi Panthulu*, *Sundarakanda*, and *Master* as examples of different approaches to the teaching profession. More recent films, including *Sir*, have brought educational inequality, institutional interests, and the responsibility of teachers towards disadvantaged students into public discussion.

Nevertheless, the specific representation of Telugu language teachers and lecturers deserves closer attention. The distinction between schoolteachers, college lecturers, professors, and Telugu language specialists is important because their professional roles, social expectations, and cinematic functions may differ.

The present study addresses this issue through a thematic comparison of selected films. It treats the perceived decline in professional dignity as a question for critical examination rather than as an established historical fact.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive-analytical research design. It uses textual analysis to examine how teachers and lecturers are characterized, how they interact with students, and how their professional identities contribute to the development of film narratives.

Selection of Films

The films are selected purposively to represent different periods and narrative approaches. They are not intended to constitute an exhaustive survey of Telugu cinema. The principal films considered are:

- *Missamma* (1955)
- *Badi Panthulu* (1972)
- *Sundarakanda* (1992)
- *Master* (1997)
- *Tagore* (2003)
- *Sir* (2023)

These films provide contrasting examples of teachers as professionals, mentors, romantic

characters, and agents of social change.

Analytical Framework

The selected films are examined under the following themes:

1. Professional dignity and social respect.
2. Knowledge, intellectual authority, and classroom discipline.
3. Comedy, romance, and the treatment of teacher–student relationships.
4. Representation of Telugu language and literary culture.
5. Educational inequality and the social responsibility of teachers.
6. The influence of commercial storytelling on professional representation.

Limitations

The study is interpretive and based on selected films and published secondary material. It does not include a systematic census of all Telugu films, audience surveys, interviews with teachers, or statistical measurements of changes in public attitudes. Consequently, the findings identify representational patterns and critical concerns rather than establish a causal relationship between cinema and the actual social status of teacher.

Analysis and Discussion

From the Ideal Teacher to the Commercially Constructed Character

The idealized teacher: Badi Panthulu (1972)

Badi Panthulu presents the teacher as a figure of integrity, sacrifice, discipline, and moral responsibility. The film offers a representation in which teaching is connected with service to society and the welfare of students. It provides a useful point of comparison for examining the values traditionally associated with the teaching profession.

In idealized representations, the teacher is respected because of knowledge, experience, and commitment to students. Such characters embody the belief that education is a social responsibility rather than merely a source of employment.

In other cinematic narratives, however, the teacher's professional identity may become secondary to comedy, romance, action, or the hero's personal journey. This does not necessarily indicate a decline in social respect, but it can reduce the complexity of the profession on screen.

The important question is whether the teacher is portrayed as an individual with intellectual depth and professional responsibilities or merely as a convenient character within a commercial plot.

Humour and the Reduction of Professional Authority

Comedy is an essential element of popular cinema. Teachers can legitimately be portrayed as humorous, imperfect, or unconventional individuals. However, a distinction must be made between humour that humanizes educators and humour that repeatedly makes their knowledge, speech, appearance, or classroom authority the object of ridicule.

When teachers are consistently represented as incompetent, excessively timid, foolish, or incapable of controlling a classroom, their professional credibility may be weakened. The problem becomes more serious when students are depicted as inherently superior to teachers without any recognition of the intellectual effort required for teaching.

A critical analysis must therefore examine the context of the humour, the narrative consequences, and the response of other characters. A single comic scene cannot establish a general pattern of degradation. Repeated portrayals across a substantial sample of films would provide stronger evidence.

For Telugu teachers, this issue also concerns language. If a teacher's pronunciation, accent, or formal Telugu is used merely as a source of ridicule, the film may unintentionally reinforce the idea that proficiency in Telugu is less valuable than fluency in English or familiarity with contemporary popular culture.

Romanticization of the Lecturer–Student Relationship

The lecturer as a romantic character: Sundarakanda (1992)

The film places a college lecturer within a romantic-comedy narrative involving a student's attraction to him. This representation differs from the conventional image of the teacher as a moral guide and illustrates how a lecturer's professional role can be intertwined with personal relationships.

The romantic portrayal of lecturers raises important questions about professional boundaries, institutional authority, and the teacher–student relationship. Romance in itself does not diminish the dignity of a lecturer. However, when a teacher's intellectual contribution becomes incidental to a romantic plot, the professional dimensions of the character may receive insufficient attention.

A responsible cinematic treatment should recognize the asymmetry of authority between teachers and students, particularly where students are young or dependent on teachers for academic evaluation. The narrative should not trivialize coercion, inappropriate conduct, or the misuse of institutional power.

For Telugu language lecturers, this concern is especially relevant when literary knowledge and pedagogical skill are overshadowed by romantic characterization.

The Hero-Centred Lecturer

The lecturer as a mass-appeal protagonist: Master (1997)

Master presents a college professor whose relationship with students is central to the narrative. The film combines the teacher's institutional role with the conventions of popular commercial cinema.

The hero-centred narrative creates both opportunities and limitations. On the positive side, a popular actor playing a teacher can make education an attractive subject and bring public attention to the responsibilities of educators.

On the other hand, the character may derive authority primarily from physical strength, personal charisma, or the ability to defeat opponents. These qualities may be dramatically effective but cannot substitute for subject knowledge, pedagogical competence, patience, research, and the capacity to guide students intellectually.

The issue is not that teachers should never be portrayed as heroic figures. Rather, cinema should recognize that the everyday work of teaching can itself be heroic without requiring the teacher to become an action-oriented saviour.

The Teacher as an Agent of Social Change

The educator and social responsibility: Tagore (2003)

Tagore uses an educator figure within a larger narrative about corruption and social responsibility. Such a representation connects educational values with the wider problems of public life.

Socially oriented films can restore the moral significance of teaching by portraying educators as individuals concerned with justice, equality, and the welfare of disadvantaged communities.

Nevertheless, these narratives can also create an unrealistic expectation that an individual teacher must solve structural problems through extraordinary personal action. Educational inequality, inadequate institutional support, commercial pressures, and unequal access to resources cannot be resolved through individual heroism alone.

A balanced representation should combine the personal commitment of teachers with recognition of institutional responsibilities and the collective nature of educational reform.

Contemporary Concerns: Sir (2023)

The teacher and educational inequality: Sir (2023)

Sir, also known as Vaathi, follows a teacher who works to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students while confronting institutional interests that undermine public education. Its narrative foregrounds the teacher's educational mission and the importance of access to learning.

The film provides a useful counterpoint to the argument that Telugu cinema invariably diminishes the teaching profession. It presents teaching as a socially consequential activity and highlights the relationship between educational access and economic inequality.

The character's significance arises from teaching itself: explaining subjects, supporting students, and challenging obstacles to education. At the same time, the narrative uses familiar commercial conventions to dramatize its message.

This combination demonstrates that popular cinema can make the teaching profession central to a compelling story while addressing the wider social conditions in which teachers work.

Specific Problems in the Representation of Telugu Teachers and Lecturers

The representation of Telugu language educators deserves particular attention because their professional responsibilities extend beyond ordinary classroom instruction.

Area of representation	Potential problem	Preferred approach
Language proficiency	Telugu pronunciation or formal speech is used merely for ridicule	Present linguistic diversity respectfully and recognize language expertise
Subject knowledge	Telugu literature is portrayed as outdated or irrelevant	Demonstrate its relevance to culture, critical thinking, and contemporary life
Professional authority	Teachers are routinely shown as incapable or foolish	Portray authority through knowledge, fairness, and pedagogical competence
Social status	Teaching is presented as an inferior career	Recognize teaching as skilled intellectual and social work
Lecturer–student relations	Romantic or comic elements overshadow professional boundaries	Show relationships with sensitivity to ethics and institutional responsibilities
Academic work	Research, literary criticism, and scholarship receive little attention	Include teachers as researchers, writers, translators, and public intellectuals

These concerns should be understood as analytical categories for examining films, not as claims that every category appears in every Telugu film.

The Marginalization of Telugu Language and Literature

One important issue is the possibility that Telugu language education may be presented as less useful than English, technology, commerce, or professional courses. When films associate success exclusively with English-speaking characters or financially rewarding careers, they may contribute to a hierarchy in which regional-language knowledge appears less prestigious.

However, the use of English or the portrayal of English-speaking characters does not automatically indicate hostility towards Telugu. The relevant question is whether the film consistently associates Telugu with backwardness and English with intelligence, modernity, and economic success.

Telugu teachers and lecturers should be represented as professionals who possess specialized knowledge of language, literature, linguistics, literary history, translation, and cultural criticism. Their expertise deserves recognition alongside other academic disciplines.

The Gap Between Teaching and Institutional Reality

Cinema often simplifies educational institutions to create dramatic conflict. A teacher may be portrayed as entirely virtuous, while administrators or private educational institutions are depicted as wholly corrupt. Conversely, teachers may be portrayed as obstacles to student freedom.

Neither extreme necessarily reflects the complexity of actual educational practice. Real teachers work within institutional regulations, examination systems, administrative demands, changing curricula, and diverse student needs.

A realistic portrayal should examine these pressures without either idealizing teachers or reducing them to stereotypes.

Gender and the Professional Identity of Teachers

Women teachers and lecturers may also be represented through expectations concerning appearance, romance, marriage, family responsibilities, or personal sacrifice. Such portrayals can shift attention away from their intellectual and professional achievements.

A more balanced approach would recognize women educators as independent professionals, researchers, mentors, administrators, and scholars. The same principle applies to teachers from different social and economic backgrounds.

Major Findings

The interpretive analysis of the selected films suggests the following observations:

1. Teacher representation is diverse. Telugu cinema includes idealized teachers, lecturers in romantic narratives, commercially constructed heroes, and educators who challenge social inequality.
2. Professional dignity depends on characterization. Humour and romance are not inherently degrading. The concern arises when they consistently replace professional knowledge, ethical responsibility, and intellectual identity.
3. Commercial conventions shape teacher characters. In some films, the teacher's professional identity is adapted to action, comedy, romance, or hero-centred storytelling.
4. Language and cultural prestige require further examination. The representation of Telugu teachers provides an opportunity to investigate how cinema constructs the relative value of Telugu, English, and different forms of knowledge.
5. Socially conscious films offer alternative representations. Films such as Badi Panthulu and Sir demonstrate that teachers can occupy central narrative roles associated with educational commitment and social responsibility.

6. The evidence does not establish an actual decline in social status. Selected film examples can demonstrate changing or contrasting representations, but proving a historical decline would require a larger film sample and evidence from audiences, teachers, and other social groups.

Suggestions for Improving the Representation of Telugu Teachers

The following recommendations may help filmmakers and researchers develop more balanced representations of Telugu teachers and lecturers.

- Emphasize intellectual competence: Show teachers explaining complex ideas, encouraging critical thinking, conducting research, and guiding students towards independent learning.
- Respect Telugu language expertise: Portray Telugu literature, grammar, poetry, and linguistic scholarship as intellectually demanding and culturally significant.
- Use humour responsibly: Allow teachers to have human weaknesses without repeatedly making their profession or language the target of ridicule.
- Maintain professional boundaries: Represent teacher–student relationships with appropriate attention to power, consent, and institutional ethics.
- Recognize institutional realities: Address workload, academic freedom, educational inequality, inadequate resources, and administrative pressures where relevant to the story.
- Include diverse educators: Present teachers from different genders, social backgrounds, age groups, and institutional settings as complex individuals.
- Avoid excessive idealization: Dignity does not require depicting every teacher as flawless. Realistic characters can acknowledge mistakes, conflicts, and professional challenges.
- Encourage academic research: Film studies scholars, Telugu departments, and teacher-education institutions can collaborate to examine cinematic representations and their reception by audiences.

Conclusion

The status of teachers in society is shaped by several factors, including educational policy, employment conditions, economic structures, public attitudes, institutional practices, and cultural representation. Telugu cinema is one part of this broader social environment. It can reinforce existing stereotypes, challenge them, or create new ways of understanding the teaching profession.

The selected films reveal contrasting images of teachers and lecturers. Badi Panthulu emphasizes moral responsibility and sacrifice; Sundarakanda places a lecturer within a romantic-comedy framework; Master combines teaching with commercial heroism; Tagore connects educational values with social responsibility; and Sir foregrounds the teacher's role in addressing educational inequality.

These examples suggest that the central issue is not the disappearance of respect for teachers from Telugu cinema but the changing ways in which that respect is represented. When teachers are reduced to comic stereotypes, romantic devices, or secondary characters, their intellectual contributions may become less visible. When films emphasize knowledge, ethical conduct, scholarship, and social commitment, they can reaffirm the value of the teaching profession.

The representation of Telugu language teachers is especially significant because they contribute to the preservation and development of Telugu literature, linguistic knowledge, and cultural identity. Their work should not be viewed as less valuable simply because its economic rewards may differ from those of other professions.

Ultimately, Telugu cinema should be encouraged to portray teachers and lecturers as realistic, intellectually capable, socially engaged, and professionally diverse individuals. Such representations would

not only strengthen the cultural recognition of educators but also encourage a more thoughtful public discussion of education, language, and social responsibility.

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