



ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access

Vol.10 No.3, September 2025

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.3, September, 2025

Drama with a Social Purpose: Gurajada Appa Rao's *Kanyasulkam*

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Received- 07/07/2025, Revised-09/07/2025, Accepted-25/07/2025, Published-30/07/2025

Abstract: The dichotomy of art for art's sake and art for society's sake exists in all literatures since the Victorian period. Some writers opine that 'art is an aim in itself; to convert it into a means of achieving any extraneous aim' which some other writers believe that 'the society is not made for the artist, but the artist for society. The function of art is to achieve to assist the development of man's consciousness, to improve the social system.' Gurajada Appa Rao, lauded as 'Kavisekhara', 'Abyudaya Kavitha Pithamahudu', 'Mahakavi' (the great poet), is one of the pioneers of Indian theatre, Indian drama, Indian poetry, and above all an influential social reformer of his age who strongly believed the principles of art for society's sake. He has made a determined effort to arouse public by exposing social evils in his works. He has paved the way for the development of modern Telugu literature. His *Kanyasulkam* is often considered the greatest play in the Telugu language. The objective of the paper is to make a thorough study on his *magnum opus Kanyasulkam* that deals with social issues, portrays the practice of 'Kanya-sulkam' (bride price) which was common in Telugu-speaking areas of Southern India. Controversial in its time, the play continues to be one of the most popular Telugu literary works of all time. A number of expressions such as 'damid katha addam tirigindi' used by Gurajada in the play are still popular in the present days. Besides being a social drama, it also exposes other evils like old men marrying female babies, prostitution, official corruption, superstitious beliefs like horoscope, babas, witchcrafts etc. The play also advocates reforms as abolition of the prostitution, encouraging modern education, female education, and widow remarriages.

Keywords: Art for Art's Sake, Art for Society's Sake, *Kanyasulkam*, Telugu literature, Indian theatre, social reformer.

In English literature, at the end of the 19th century, one perceives a confluence of two schools namely 'art for art's sake' and 'art for society's sake.' To the 'art for art's sake' belong writers like E.M. Foster, Oscar Wilde and others. In the words of J.A. Cuddon (1999),



The phrase 'art for art's sake' connotes the idea that a work of art has an intrinsic value without didactic or moral purpose. Throughout the 19th century it became a guiding principle for many writers. (57)

To the 'art for society's sake' belong writers such as Henrik Ibsen of Norway, George Bernard Shaw of England and others. The writers of this school thought that a work must make the audience think and rouse the social and moral consciousness of the people of the times. They also believed that the function of the artist is not simply to instruct but to reveal the truth that lies in the heart of man; and in the heart of the universe. In other words, the first school was the credo 'art for art's sake' and the second school was the protest 'art for society's sake.'

Like George Bernard Shaw who exposed social evils like dowry, prostitution, and economic exploitation, Gurajada Venkata Appa Rao Pantulu, hailed as the 'father of Modern Telugu literature,' too blazed a new trail in play-writing as also in poetry and short story. For his solid contribution to Telugu literature, he was often considered and lauded as *Mahakavi* (the great poet) besides holding the titles *Kavishekara* and *Abyudaya kavitha pithamahudu*. Today, he is not just be remembered as a great poet and playwright but also an earnest social reformer and true patriot.

Gurajada made a determined effort to arouse public opinion on the subject of exposing the social evil through his works and became an influential social reformer of his age. Through his writings Gurajada paved the way not only for the development of modern Telugu literature but also for social reformation of the Telugu society that was troubled by the dark social practices such as child marriages, Kanyasulkam (bride price) etc. According to critics, "the quintessence of Gurajada lay in *Kanyasulkam* and the issue he so masterfully addressed in it which are relevant even in the 21st century" (*Times of India*, 2016). The characters created by Gurajada, whether they are the major and the minor ones, "spring to life with such verve that they run away with the play" (Narla 50). His aim was to advance the cause of social reform making good use of spoken Telugu. He liberally used the poetic stanzas from Eastern and Western literature and "peppers the character of Gireesam to a presentable height" (Teertha). As a result, he is universally respected for heralding the modern era. His epochal writings had far reaching influence and encompassed many aspects of modern Telugu Literature. Sri Sri and several other major figures had almost idolized him.



Kanyasulkam was his famous drama in which his purpose was the reformation of the society and literature. In the Introduction of *Gurajada Rachanulu*, Setti Eswara Rao aptly says thus:

Kanyasulkam is billed as one of the greatest works in world literature. Many a literary critic said repeatedly that if one were to collect a list of one hundred indispensable books from all the languages of the world combined, *Kanyasulkam* would figure prominently in that list. (Eswara Rao)

The play can be called a social tract in dramatic form as it exposes such social evils as *bride price, marriage by old men, old men marrying female babies, prostitution, official corruption, the perfidy in legal profession, and superstitious belief like horoscope, babas, witchcrafts etc.* The play also advocates such reforms as *abolition of the practice of prostitution, modern education, female education, and widow remarriages.* As a critic puts it ‘the play is ageless in the sense that its projection of the Indian mindset and psyche is very relevant and applicable in Indian society today. The play was in some ways ahead of its time and was very bold in criticizing the popular opinions and practices during that era. It frequently jabs at the male-dominated society of India, by bringing to the forefront certain egoistic idiosyncrasies of a typical Indian male, in an unflattering manner. It also questions the practices of witchcraft, sorcery, and their popular usage in medical practice during that period in India.’

The play *Kanyasulkam* drew its inspiration from the social conditions of the 19th century that witnessed various social movements like the advent of the English education in India, women uplift movement, etc. Just as Raja Rammohun Roy and Iswarachandra Vidya Sagar became the pioneers of women uplift movement in West Bengal, Kandukuri Veeresalingam and Gurajada Appa Rao concerned themselves with Indian woman and strongly felt that they should bring reforms through.

The evils in those days were *Kanyasulkam* (bride price), marriage of men in their old age and the evil of prostitution. The ‘Sulka’ marriages were prevalent among the Brahmins. Girls, hardly two or three years old, were sold by their parents for a price to the highest bidder. There was the evil of ‘old age’ marriages. An old man with one foot in the graveyard marrying a very young girl was not uncommon. In fact, these twin evils came in the way of social dignity and justice. In his preface to the first edition of *Kanyasulkam*, Gurajada gives the social milieu that led him to write the play:



Under the order of His Highness the Maharajah of Vizianagaram, a list was prepared ten years ago of Brahmin sulka marriages celebrated in the ordinary tracts of Vizagapatnam District during three years. The list is by no means exhaustive as the parties concerned were naturally averse to admitting acceptance of bride-money; but such as it is, it forms a document of great value and interest. The number of marriages recorded reached one thousand and thirty four, giving an average of three hundred and forty four for the year. Ninety nine girls were married at the age of five years, forty four at four, thirty six at three, six at two, and three at the age of one, the babies in the last instance carrying a price of from three hundred and fifty to four hundred rupees a head. Strange as it may sound, bargains are sometimes struck for children in the womb. Such a scandalous state of things is a disgrace to society, and literature cannot have a higher function than to show up such practices and give currency to a high standard of moral ideas. Until reading habits prevail among masses, one must look only to the stage to exert such healthy influence. These considerations prompted me to compose *Kanyasulkam*. (Gurajada 10).

These words of Gurajada bear a testimony to his commitment as an artist and also his activist temper.

The play is a highly thought-provoking social drama dealing with the problem of bride price. It is the story of Agnihotravadhanlu, resident of Krishnarayapura Agraharam, who lives with his wife Venkamma, his two daughters Butchamma and Subbamma, and his son Venkatesam. After receiving a bride price of Rs.1,600/-, Agnihotravadhanlu arranges the marriage of Butchamma with an old man. But the old man dies soon after the marriage. As a result Butchamma returns home, while Venkateswam is sent to Vijayanagaram, a centre of learning, to receive 'English' Education. As he doesn't make strides, he returns home along with Girisam, his tutor. Girisam, the new entrant, lures Butchamma, a virgin widow.

Meanwhile, Agnihotravadhanlu decides, against the wishes of his wife and elder daughter, to marry off Subbamma, with Lubdhavadhanlu, resident of Ramachandrapura Agraharam, a sixty year old man, for a bride price of Rs.1,800/-. Venkamma, his wife asks Karataka Sastri, her brother, to hit upon a plan to save Subbamma. Butchamma too asks Girisam to take steps to stop the marriage between Lubdhavadhanlu and Subbi. Impressed by the disguised Gunturu Sastrulu who is no other than Karataka Sastri, Madhuravani, a prostitute, too takes pity on Subbi and goads Ramappantulu, Karanam of Ramachandrapura Agraharam, her



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customer, who is a mediator between Agnihotravadhanlu and Lubdhavadhanlu, to stall the marriage. Instigated by Madhuravani, Ramappantulu concocts a letter to have been written by Agnihotravadhanlu. The letter says that Agnihotravadhanlu is not prepared to give his daughter in marriage to the old man. Asked by Butchamma, Girisam too writes a letter to Lubdhavadhanlu asking to pay more than what he said earlier. A miser, Lubdhavadhanlu, is afraid of the heavy expenses involved in this match. Meanwhile, he receives another letter, forged by Ramappantulu, apparently from Agnihotravadhanlu, cancelling the match on the ground that he has been excommunicated because of his daughter's misconduct.

The play takes a new turn now. The two letters – the one from Ramappantulu and the other from Girisam – upset the stingy Lubdhavadhanlu who then decides to marry any other girl at a lower bride price. Ramappantulu arranges for the marriage between Lubdhavadhanlu and the daughter of Gunturu Sastrulu who is no other than Mahesam, his pupil. But the marriage is performed in the absence of Ramappantulu. After the marriage, Karataka Sastri runs away with the necklace. Pestered by Madhuravani, Ramappantulu wants to get back the necklace. Not knowing the development at Ramachandrapura Agraharam, the marriage party led by Agnihotravadhanlu reaches the Agraharam. Meanwhile, Girisam entices Butchamma by his offer of marriage and hits out a plan whereby eloping to Lubdhavadhanlu's village, finding out which Agnihotravadhanlu would repent and stop marrying Subbamma to an old man lest the same fate should befall her. After knowing all these happenings, Agnihotravadhanlu lodges a complaint against Lubdhavadhanlu but loses the case. Even Ramappantulu drags Lubdhavadhanlu to court staging that the latter has killed the new bride. Fortunately, with the help of Sowjanya Rao Pantulu, a vakil, Lubdhavadhanlu wins the case. In the meantime, Girisam approaches Lubdhavadhanlu for the conferring of the power of attorney. Madhuravani exposes the dubious nature of Girisam and succeeds in saving Lubdhavadhanlu from becoming a prey to the greed of Girisam. The play ends with Girisam's step out, crest-fallen.

The major concern of Gurajada in *Kanyasulkam* is with social problem – bride price. The selling away of a small girl, Subbi, for Rs.1,800/- to Lubdhavadhanlu is a case in point. Luckily this did not materialize as Karataka Sastri went there along with his pupil Mahesam, disguised as a girl, who married with Lubdhavadhanlu, before the actual marriage to take place between Subbi and Lubdhavadhanlu. Dr. Ratan Bhattacharjee rightly points out thus:



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Such incidents of selling girls in poor family are very much common occurrences in the third world countries. It is the subject of a good many diasporic writings. Tribal girls are being sold in the far-off villages for a small amount of money, say 15000 to 17000 rupees. There exists such a well-greased system where agents supply the girls from the tribal families to the Hindu family. Of late, a girl who starred the Oscar winning film 'Slumdog Millionaire' as Latika, was, according to a British tabloid, bargained for sale for an amount of two million pounds. Quite naturally, the fate of the hapless girls of poor families can be easily guessed. The play by Gurujada Venkata Appa Rao is quite naturally a very much relevant book in the present social context of girl-selling. It is something more. It is an artistic presentation of a social problem. (Bhattacharjee, 2007, 58).

Gurujada using humour as a powerful weapon lashes out family system. He becomes critical of the marriage system and shows how it lost all validity and how it became sordid, mechanical, and materialistic. Agnihotravadhanlu is in a confused state whether to follow the tradition or to embrace the dashing modernism. Knowing full well that the traditional education doesn't get any money for him, he sends his son to receive 'English' education. He is a fool because he doesn't know that to sell young girls to old men is a social injustice. The conversation pertaining to Venkatesam's education illustrates this point thus:

KARATAKA SASTRI

Agnihotravadhanlu Guru. Why do you hesitate to educate your son? What happened to the amount of Rs.1,500/- which you got by selling Butchamma?

GIRI

Selling girls! Damn it.

AGNI

Every ass says that I have sold her away. Is she a vegetable to be sold? What would have happened to that widow had I not taken the money then? (*Kanyasulkam*, 41)

There are two virgin widows in the play who become a prey to the bride price. They are Putakullamma and Meenakshi who bear a witness to the evil effects of the child marriage.

Putakullamma's parents decided to send her with an old and crippled man when she was toddling as a child. The old man passed away at the moment of tying the holy chord (Mangalasutra) or a moment after

it. A debate took place whether the marriage was practically over or not. Some said that it was over, others said that it was not. The father of the girl went to court against the heirs of the bridegroom. The priest whose palms were greased by the heirs of the bridegroom, said that it was not over. With it, the case was lost. Nobody married her again. (*Kanyasulkam* 34)

This type of widow quenches the sexual passion of lusty fellows like Girisam. Meenakshi is the only daughter of Lubdhavadhanlu. Her greedy father performs her marriage with an old man but she becomes a widow immediately. The moment she reaches puberty she quenches her sexual urge clandestinely. She maintains an illegal contact with Ramappa. She poses a problem to her parents every year because of the abortion.

Naidu, a lawyer makes a passing reference to Butchamma and says thus:

He (Agni) gave his daughter in marriage to a thousand month old Brahmin of Madhavaram by receiving money. During the marriage itself the Brahmin passed away. On behalf of the girl Agni filed a suit in the court for lands. (*Kanyasulkam* 230-231)

Thus, in a veiled way Gurajada brings about three child marriages which easily become instances of injustice. Through the nonperformance of Subbi's marriage, the playwright also discusses tellingly the role of literature in confronting social injustice.

Besides the problems of bride price and child marriage Gurajada draws our attention to the problem of prostitution. The prostitute community played an important role in the realms of politics and fine arts. In the then society the prostitute remained sadly as a poor seller of her flesh. She even became the destroyer of family system and thus posed a problem to the society. So, the rehabilitation of the prostitutes became one of the items of the reformers in their programme. The pseudo-reformers were inhuman and even cruel towards the prostitutes. Gurajada knew the problem thoroughly and wrote the works which practically stirred the conscience of the reformers. The formers thought that the prostitutes had to be blow down economically and only then they would leave their profession. The words of Girisam illustrate this:

We need not kill them. We need not ask them to go. Better not to invite the prostitutes to marriages, not even keep them with us. Let us scold the persons who invite and keep the prostitutes. All the intelligent people like me must be united in this venture. Only then prostitutes would be rooted out. (*Kanyasulkam* 93)

This inhuman attitude on the part of the reformers becomes an instance of injustice. In the bad, may lie an element of goodness. The playwright proves this through the character of Madhuravani.

Madhuravani enters the stage by stating that one should have a moral policy of one's own and leaves it by uttering a few words of sympathy to Girisam. Though she is a prostitute, she is not at all for money. She cares for values like humanism and truth. The people of the so called civilized society, who want to utilize her for their selfish ends become pawns in her hands towards the end. She pinpoints the mistakes in Girisam, Karataka SASTRI, Lubdhavadhani and then helps them. The character of Madhuravani thus becomes an eye-opener to the social reformers of the period. The following conversation between Madhuravani and SOWJANYA RAO Pantulu illustrates this:

MADHURAVANI

Since a long time I have a doubt in the matter of anti Nautch. If you pardon me, I will tell you.

SOWJANYA RAO

Please tell us.

MADHURAVANI

If the prostitutes are not invited to Nautch how can they survive?

SOWJANYA RAO

Better they marry.

MADHURAVANI

Do you mean persons like Girisam?

SOWJANYA RAO

Girisam does not indulge in such unholy affair.

MADHURAVANI

But, how to get the right grooms for the prostitutes who want to marry? Do you mean any kind of fellow?

SOWJANYA RAO

I have not bestowed any attention on this aspect. (*Kanyasulkam* 256-257)



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Perhaps, for the first time in Telugu literary history, a prostitute was given a very positive image so much so that she is shown to better the lives of many people during the course of the play.

In the Gurajada canon one finds a stiff fight against the social injustice on the one hand and pretentious reformatory zeal on the other. In those days there were a few real reformers who worked zealously. But the central concern of most of the reformers was either fame or selfishness. Gurajada had the pseudo-reformers in his mind in presenting the character of Girisam who was just an opportunist. His soliloquies reveal his crookedness as a reformer. Here is a case in point:

If I marry the virgin widow Butchamma I will enjoy both fame and physical comfort. Two birds at one shot ... Credit No.4. Then my fame will shine and reverberate like stars and the camphor crystals in the three worlds. The story of Girisam's marriage with a widow will appear in headlines in newspapers. Credit No.5: The widow Marriage Association will give me something. (*Kanyasulkam* 81-82)

Thus, Gurajada depicts the pretentious reformer in Girisam.

The playwright's handling of the element of dialogue in the play is very effective. He concerns himself with the proprieties of language and seeks dramatic consistency in his dialogue. He has chosen the Telugu language to reflect the idiom of the language of character. His sentence performs two or three functions at once. It sheds light on the character speaking, on the character spoken about and it furthers the plot. In the very opening of the play Girisam says thus:

It is evening. I borrowed twenty rupees from Putakullamma (mess woman) by telling her that I would get her provisions but spent it on the dancing girls. (*Kanyasulkam* 23)

This dialogue performs two or three functions at a stretch. It throws light on Girisam's deceitfulness. It reflects on the innocence of Putakullamma. The two names – Putakullamma and dancing girls – draw the attention of the audience and make them anxious to know who these two are and what their whereabouts are. This naturally gives us an insight into the main theme of the play i.e., child marriage and the Nautch question.

Gurajada in his play *Kanyasulkam* lashes the demoralized *Kanyasulkam* system and the stream of social life. He picturizes the young widows and their pathetic fate and the degenerated judiciary, prostitution,



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and provokes for the human values. Today, the many social evils pointed by Gurajada in the play have taken a different colour and texture in the present century but the problems not only remain but have become institutionalized. As V. Mandeswara Rao (2001) observes:

Kanyasulkam is unquestionably the most popular play of the century and has sent generations of audiences to healthy ecstatic laughter. (4)

Even B.V. Radha Krishna, who translated *Kanyasulkam* into English along with Tejaswi Bhagavathula (2016) remarks:

The fact that *Kanyasulkam* still sells and is one of the most popular plays in the history of Telugu literature goes to prove that both Gurajada and *Kanyasulkam* have stood the test of time.

Thus, Gurajada's specific purpose of writing the play *Kanyasulkam* is to create a true drama by bringing Life to the Theatre and the Theatre to Life.

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