

Southern comfort

Pronoti Datta | TNN

Madhavi Tangella's short film on Telugu labourers captures a subculture of cinema-going in the city

In 2004, film-maker Madhavi Tangella spotted a board next to a bus stop in Malad with something in Telugu written on it. Tangella can speak Telugu, but not read or write. Curious, she decided to inspect what lay behind a shady black curtain hanging near the board. When the owners stopped her saying women weren't allowed inside, she sent her husband to recce the place. To her delight, she found that it was a tiny room where Telugu movies are screened for migrant labourers.

The discovery initiated a process of getting the shack owners to trust her enough to let her make a film. More than four years later, Tangella made *Anna Sound Please*, a short film which was screened publicly for the first time on Friday at the inauguration of a certificate course by Majlis and SNTD called City Narratives in Literature and Cinema at the university's campus in Juhu.

HOME THEATRE

In the film, Tangella follows a group of daily wage labourers who work at construction sites in Mumbai. Every morning, they set out with tiffin boxes, pile into tempos and drive to wherever skyscrapers are being built. Most of them, Tangella says, have debts to pay and long to return to their villages after these have been repaid. In the film, they admit to feeling like outsiders in the city. Language is a barrier, as many of them can only understand Telugu. Till they can return, home is this tiny cinema hall where they get to speak their own language and watch their favourite movies — the best kinds are the ones packed with drama, action and grandiose dialogue. "For migrants, the city was very alien," Tangella says. "They wanted enter-

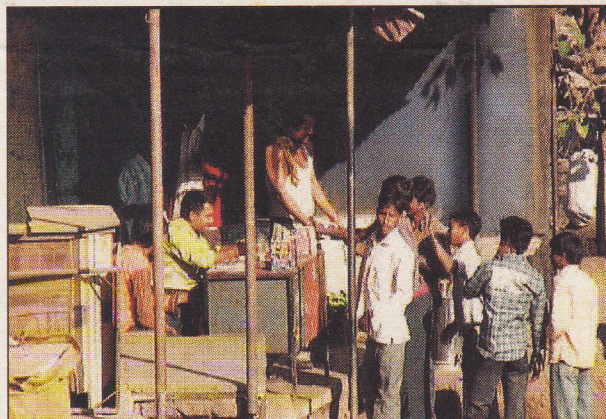


GOING NATIVE Labourers queue up to watch their favourite Telugu films in a shack in Malad

tainment in their own language." Entertainment that's dirt-cheap by any stretch — for a ticket of Rs 10, one can watch three to four films back to back.

A lovely irony of this cinema-going experience is that the owners of the shack are migrants from Uttar Pradesh. Since they only speak Hindi and UP dialects and their customers only speak Telugu, neither group can understand the other. In the film, one of the managers of the shack jokes, referring to a regular customer, that when he talks all he hears is a lot of noise. Yet they're great friends. "They give the owners a list of films they want to watch," Tangella says.

What unites both parties is the feeling of being strangers in Mumbai. Often the cinema-goers sleep at the shack. "For them this space becomes a second home," the director points out. "Half of the audience is sleeping because for them it's like a park. If they go to a park they might be questioned. One man told me: 'I show this theatre tick-



et as an ID to show where I'm from'. So the ticket becomes an identity card."

Women, on the other hand, aren't allowed as they would

Since the cinema owners speak Hindi and their patrons speak Telugu, neither group understands the other. Yet they're friends

feel uncomfortable in the company of so many men. Another reason is that many of these shacks — Tangella has documented over 40 catering to migrants from across the country in the eastern and western

suburbs — show pornography.

At the time she started researching the film, Tangella, like her subjects, was experiencing an "overwhelming sense of homelessness". So the idea of making a film about her compatriots was appealing. But she was surprised by a double irony. Most of the labourers are from Telangana, where a different form of Telugu is spoken. Tangella, who is native to Prakasam in AP, born in Pune and raised in Chennai, could barely understand them. "I went in

search of my language," she says. "That's when I realised I belong to Andhra region." Tangella had to get a friend from Hyderabad to translate.

That, however, wasn't the only challenge. It wasn't easy to follow the labourers who are itinerant — and awkward and scared about being filmed, as they live with the fear that comes from being in an alien city. "These are the people who actually build Mumbai and the amazing part is that they are invisible," Tangella says. "If you shove a mike at someone who is invisible, they feel scared."

For details of the City Narratives programme, visit www.cinemacitycourse.com.