

cinema



* Pitambaram applying makeup for M G Ramachandran.

The man behind myriad faces

Makeup artist Pitambaram had the power to make southern Indian actors shine in public consciousness, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

When you walk into a cinema, see the magic of images flash by in frame after frame, you are mesmerised by the settings, the often beautiful people, their dazzling costumes and their exquisitely made-up faces. Indeed, the face often arrests your attention, and remains in your mind's eye long after the film has rolled out of your consciousness.

I still remember Hema Malini's face in her debut work, *Sapnon Ka Saudagar*, which was so pretty that she was named "Dream Girl". I still remember Ingrid Bergman's eyes in *Casablanca*.

Then, there was southern Indian actor Gemini Ganesh's romantic look that got a million hearts fluttering, and M G Ramachandran's or Sivaji Ganesan's tens of "veshams" (guises), each pulling them into a story, a character, even an attitude.

Wearing the mask of a great Samaritan, Ramachandran or MGR as he was known, became the saviour of the world, the champion of the poor and, well, eventually the chief minister of the state of Tamil Nadu. His screen persona completely eclipsed the real him, and for his electorate, he could never do wrong.

Nobody bothered to listen to the horror stories that shadowed him all his life, and the make-believe existence he created around him. I am told that when he fell seriously ill and was being rushed to hospital, the words that he kept uttering to those few around him were, "Do not tell anybody that I am unwell".

On the other hand, N T Ramarao or NTR played the role of Hindu gods. His role as Krishna got him mega bucks and votes. His fans even worshipped him.

And NTR as the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh played the part of divine saviour to the hilt, peppering

his reign with populist goodies that pleased his subjects, but emptied the state exchequer.

In a very, very important way, the man who gave MGR and NTR this kind of imposing image and super power was Pitambaram. He made up their faces and their bodies, and injected into their egos, a stamina par excellence. Their faces launched a million expectations.

Unfortunately, I have never met Pitambaram, who died recently. He was 90, but had long ceased to work. His son, Vasu, who has directed Tamil, Telugu and Kannada movies (including Rajnikanth's *Chandramukhi*), tells me that his father moved away from greasepaint the day MGR and NTR stepped out of the cinema sets, and into their respective chief ministerial offices.

Why? Vasu says his father was never sure he would ever find that kind of respect and importance which NTR and MGR exerted



* ... with Telugu star N T Ramarao.

Photographs courtesy P Vasu.

on the public imagination. The present crop of artists, especially stars, is generally haughty and temperamental, given to tantrums and throwing men and material out of the door. In many cases, makeup men and women are as good as spot boys!

More importantly, cinema has turned natural. The days of fancy hair wigs, exaggerated eyebrows, faces plastered with cream and powder, lips painted in screaming red and garish costumes are over. Increasing efforts are being made, often unsuccessfully though, to give Indian cinema an image makeover: making it less theatrical.

And do actors, more so stars, have that kind of time and patience to get their faces made up elaborately, a process that can take hours?

Vasu avers that it took a full three hours for Pitambaram to transform NTR into a Rama or a Krishna. "During the shooting when the makeup had to be applied (for devotional characters) and removed every day for months, my father used to observe a strict, and religiously austere routine. He would sleep on the floor, on a mat, and stay off meat and fish," Vasu underlines the rare kind of dedication and passion that prevailed then.

Not just this, Pitambaram used to travel all the way to Kolkata from Chennai to get the special ingredients needed for face and body makeup. There was a factory there that made such products, harmless to human skin. In the case of some, like MGR, Pitambaram had to tan the star's amazingly fair skin. Otherwise, he would have appeared out of place in the midst of other actors on screen. For some films, like *Enga Veetu Pillai* and *Mattukara Velan*, MGR played two different characters, throwing up a challenge for Pitambaram. He had to make the two look as different as possible.

Mind you, those were the 1960s when makeup as an art was in its very nascent stage, and Pitambaram had to innovate much of the stuff necessary to alter the face.

These different looks created the characters, not quite an actor's

skills, usually confined to a few stock mannerisms.

MGR's song sequences with his trademark gestures turned him into a larger-than-life figure that the Dravidian parties capitalised on. I do not think that he was ever an actor in the sense that we understand acting today.

So, men like Pitambaram were in many ways the star makers. It is, of course, another thing that Pitambaram's creativity eventually created kings.

Pitambaram began his career as an assistant to the legendary Hari Babu in the early 1940s, and later joined the Vijay-Vauhini studios as its chief makeup man. In the 1950s, he had a separate room for himself at the studios, and great stars of the day queued up to have their faces done.

This was a very important part of one's get-up, for Indian cinema had not yet learnt the trick of digitally altering how one looked on screen. So, a makeup man was truly an artist who could make up one into someone stunning. Or, absolutely unflattering.

Pitambaram held the key to handsomeness and beauty. He could with the gentle stroke of his brush bring about an unbelievable metamorphosis.

Once, actor Ranga Rao, all of 25 years, once walked into Pitambaram's cabin, and walked out looking a hundred years older. In the couple of hours he was closeted with Pitambaram, the star had aged through decades. He looked all shrivelled and shrunk. The work was *Pathala Bhairavi*. Pitambaram had cut balloons into small pieces and pasted them on the face, painting dark lines on them that resembled old-age wrinkles.

Sure enough, it was a lot of innovation, tempered with imagination to design a million faces. Mythical, mysterious, divine and devilish — myriad qualities that spread over the screen to invent a plot. And as it progressed, the stars dazzled.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)