



Subversion of Myth and the Metaphorical Birth of 'Imagined Nation': A Critical Reading of the Film *Kantara*

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Abstract : *As part of the ongoing Hinduisation project, indigenous ritual practices are becoming susceptible to Brahmanical appropriation. Cultural alienation and ethnic cleansing of religious minorities are the detrimental weapons instrumentalised by the dominant ruling- class ideology to homogenise a heterogeneously constituted nation. Films, music, literature and paintings which engage with real life situations uphold an ideology which at times play a vital role in the construction of nation. The paper ventures to illuminate the idea of 'nation' envisioned by the dominant right- wing Hindutva ideology through the movie Kantara. The paper argues that Kantara qualifies to be a propaganda film, as it envisions the metaphorical birth of an 'imagined nation'. The paper also problematises the cultural appropriation of Panjuruli myth and Bhoota Kola- the ritual practices, as depicted in the movie.*

Key words: *Bhoota Kola, Cultural Appropriation, Hinduisation, Cultural Alienation*

Introduction

Kantara, the Kannada movie directed by the renowned film director Rishab Shetty was released in September 2022. The film was a box office hit, and garnered pan-Indian level recognition. The major theme of the movie is centred around the regional mythological narrative of *Panjuruli* which holds prominence in the cultural milieu of South Karnataka. The film has attained a broad viewership through its enthralling visuals of *Bhoota Kola* performance accompanied with the song *Varaha Roopam* composed by Ajaneesh Lokanath. *Bhoota Kola* is a ritualistic performance which encompasses various forms of artistic expression such as dance, vocal music and play thus it offers a pure visual treat to the audience. Resembling the ritual tradition of *Theyyam* in North-Malabar, *Bhoota Kola* is a ritual practice performed by individuals belonging to *Pambada*, *Parawa* and *Nellika* communities, who are the marginalised ‘lower- caste’ communities of South Karnataka.

Subversion of indigenous myths and Hinduisation of subaltern’s ritual practices have been an ongoing cultural phenomenon occurring under the influence of extreme right-wing Hindutva propaganda. Though *Kantara* has succeeded in providing an insight to regional culture it is evident that the movie functions as a catalyst in the propagation of Hindutva nationalist ideologies. Ragavendra, prominent film/literary scholar and critic has opined that “*Kantara* is a new cinema with moorings in local culture” (15). Critically examining the politics of representation, it could be deciphered that the movie has rendered the subverted narrative of *Panjuruli* myth.

The conflation of folk and indigenous cultural myth to Hindu mythology as part of Brahmanical appropriation is a

regressive act to undermine the folk tradition. Mannarakkal Dasan, the prominent folklorist and scholar in his book *Theyyam: Patronage, Appropriation and Interpolation* has emphasized the inherent risks associated with the appropriation of folk tradition, asserting that it often results in the erasure of genuine underlying reasons behind the existence of ritual practices performed by subaltern communities as these practices serve as their modes of resistance. The paper traces the *Bhoota Kola* performance in the movie to highlight and map the gradual process of cultural appropriation and also critically examines the representation of Muslim characters in the movie to unveil the idea of nation envisioned through *Kantara*

Bhoota Kola is a ritualistic spirit worship practiced by *Tuluvas* (Tulu speaking community) in the coastal areas of South- Karnataka. *Bhoota* can be translated to 'God' and *Kola* refers to 'performance' or 'play' in Tulu language. Ritual performance of *Bhoota Kola* involves invocation of divine spirits of local deities. "The origin of *Boota* cult can be traced to the concepts of totemism and ancestor worship. Later the cult of mother goddess, serpent and trees are incorporated into this" (Padmanabha and Bhatt 3).

Panjuruli is one among the spirits worshiped as part of *Bhoota Kola*. According to Nitcher, "*Bhootas* of *Tulunadu* can be categorized into two broad iconographic groups: those with animal shape and those with anthropomorphic shapes. The animal shaped *Bhootas* are the earliest of the totems of *Tulunadu* and include forms of wild boar, tiger and cobra" (Dasan 23). *Panch* refers to wild- boar in Tulu. *Panjuruli*, according to oratures is a worship of wild boar. *Pambadan*, *Nellika*, *Parawa* communities claim to be the original

practitioners of *Bhoota Kola* tradition. *Paddanas* (Oratures) suggests that *Bhoota Kola* practices predates Vedic Hindu era. The film has portrayed a subverted version of *Panjuruli* myth. Subversion of myths by the influence of Sanskritization becomes visible in the song *Varaha Roopam*. The age-old spirit of *Panjuruli* became *Varaha* the third incarnations of Vishnu. The indigenous myth has been stripped off from its own culture and has become part of Hinduism.

The oral mythological narrative of *Panjuruli* suggests that during the ancient period, for protecting the crops from the attack of wild boar, farmers worshiped the wild boar and observed *Bhoota Kola* annually. Mythological narrative of *Panjuruli* also serves as an account that signifies the dynamics of nature and human relationship. It symbolises the challenges encountered by the subaltern to contain the adverse natural forces in their battle for survival. Brahminical appropriation of *Panjuruli* myth to Hinduism results in the obliteration of the historical recollections pertaining to subaltern's enduring struggle for existence. Thus, the song *Varaha Roopam* propagates a false narrative of *Bhoota Kola* as part of conscious efforts to subvert the indigenous myth, and to erase the cultural plurality. Through the erasure of cultural plurality, the Hindutva propaganda attains its goal of constructing a 'homogenous nation'.

The process of Hinduisation of *Bhoota Kola* also becomes evident through scrutinizing the evolution of props employed in it, especially the alterations in the facial art. *Kantara* has portrayed *Bhoota Kola* performed by the protagonist Siva, and also the performance done by his father. Notable changes could be witnessed in the props and facial make up employed in both of these performances. The facial

paintings on Siva's father include plain lines and dots in his forehead on the other hand these particular symbols were replaced by *Thrishulam* (trident) and *Thrikannu* (third eye) in the *Bhoota Kola* performed by Siva towards the end of the movie accompanied with the song *Varaha Roopam*. The explicit alterations in the facial make up of *Bhoota Kola* has a huge cultural significance. It suggests the appropriation of *Bhoota* cult which was primordially a part of non-Vedic tradition, to Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The impact of Hinduization is thus reflected in *Bhoota* cult. The name Siva also suggests the covert ideological undercurrents of the movie.

Appropriation of indigenous cultural practices also result in the alienation of subaltern from their own collective memory as it engraves subalterns' struggles and protest against tyranny and oppression. Regional folklorists have admitted that the process of Sanskritization has its claws on indigenous folk tradition. Mannarakkal Dasan has rightly elaborated upon this phenomenon :

Cultural appropriation subsumes a vast range of cultural practices including art, music, religion, language and social behaviour. The symbolic elements of world are often removed from their context, stripped off their meaning, and distorted so much so that it provides divergent, if not opposite, symbolic experiences. (Dasan 102)

In this context, it could be argued that *Kantara* caters to Hindutva agenda and the film qualifies to be the finest example of the cultural hijack of "lower myths" as part of Hinduisation. The Sanskrit rendering of *Varaha Roopam* as

the background musical score for the *Bhoota Kola* manifests the extent to which subversion of indigenous myths have been normalised.

In an interview, when Rishab Shetty was questioned by Chethan Ahimsa, an actor and Kannada Dalit activist about the Hinduisation of *Panjuruli* myth, he refused to approve of it and maintained the view that the people belonging to *Nelika* community, the original practitioners of *Bhoota Kola* themselves believe *Panjuruli* as the incarnation of Vishnu. It also reflects the marginalised communities' propensity to debunk their own myth through internalising the agenda of dominant caste. Comprehending the fact that movie's narrative is inherently fictional and delving into questions concerning the ethics of representation and artist's freedom of expression, it remains pertinent to scrutinize whether the makers of *Kantara* exercise the power to refrain from acknowledging the fact that they have portrayed the subverted myth. Given the fictional nature of the movie and artists' freedom to depict alternative versions of myths onscreen, this study posits that it is incumbent upon the creators, as a matter of ethical concern to exhibit the courtesy to acknowledge the fact that the movie depicted subverted myth in the offscreen context.

In a conversation with distinguished folklore scholar Y.V. Kannan, it has been communicated that certain *Theyyam* practitioners themselves have willingly aligned to acculturation process unfolding as part of Sanskritization. Upon examining the cultural appropriation of *Panjuruli* to *Varaha* it becomes evident that a significant portion of community remains unaware of the dormant perils of the acculturation process rooted in Hinduization. Folklorists also

suggest that the subversion and cultural appropriation of regional myths and cultural practices occurs as part of the lack of proper documentation of oratures.

Religion, Myth, and Construction of Nation

Film adaptations of classical myths, especially that of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are a customary trend within the sphere of Indian cinematic culture. These movies have also received a huge viewership and a fanbase. Tracing the history of film adaptations of religious myths, it is evident that, initially, such movies explicitly functioning as catalyst for evoking religious sentiments. However, in the contemporary times, these movies are likely to be commercial films that primarily focus on entertainment value. In contrast to *Kantara*, most of the Malayalam films based on ritualistic performances of *Theyyam* (identical to *Bhoota Kola*), usually fall under the category of 'art-films' except the movie *Kaliyattam*

Kantara, qualifies to be a propaganda movie and envisions the metaphorical birth of an 'imagined nation'. This section of the paper tries to explore the various ways in which the movie becomes a propaganda. The movie addresses the critical questions of land ownership by depicting the three-way conflict that arises between the State- represented by the forest officer, landlord and tribes or the residents of the forest. People have their own perception of land and it leads to the conflict between forest officials and tribals during the land encroachment. These incidents in the movie probe into numerous questions regarding the rightful proprietors of forest territory.

During the survey of forest land prior to land encroachment, a rock bearing *Trishulam* symbol was unearthed. This particular incident in the movie functions as a metaphor and indicates the birth of a 'Hindu Nation'. *Bhoota Kola* performed in the beginning of the movie and in the climax functions as a connecting link of the past to the present. Y.V.Kannan, the folklorist remarks that lower-caste communities while performing certain ritualistic practices that narrate their struggles, the oppressed revisit their own wounded past. He has also informed that performances are susceptible to changes over the course of period. Thus, it could be deciphered that Hinduised form of *Bhoota Kola* is a result of the birth of 'Hindu nation'. Eventually, in the end, Hinduised form of *Bootha Kola* unites the forest official and tribals together by holding their hands. It offers an insight into the ongoing project of nation building undertaken by extreme right -wing conservatives and echoes the 'one-nature, one-culture' rule.

The storyline becomes further apocryphal and problematic when we analyse the portrayal of Muslim characters in the movie. Stereotypical representation of religious minorities is a trend that gets nurtured under the Hindutva propaganda. *Kantara* has elements of bigotry to appease a certain majoritarian audience. The movie has a Muslim character Abu who is involved in cracker making business. He along with other Muslim characters get killed in an accidental explosion of firecrackers. It is true that irrespective of religious, caste and gender identities, people were subjected to fatalities in the mutiny that occurred between the landlords and tribals, but the abrupt emergence of a group of Muslim men from nowhere in that particular juncture of the movie indicates the hidden political agenda.

The collective assassination of Muslims specifically points to the ethnic cleansing and hate crimes aimed at religious minorities in the country. The strategical erasure of religious minorities resonates with the state's indifference and hatred towards them. Thus, it could be inferred that islamophobia which has infected movies around the globe unleashes in *Kantara* as part of the construction of a "homogenised nation".

Is *Kantara* a tale of resistance?

Kantara has vividly portrayed the systemic oppression and exploitation of lower- caste communities based on their caste identity. The tribes were sidelined and spatially distanced by zamindars as part of untouchability. The film has narrated the formidable act of resistance of the hero Siva who has courageously revolted against caste discrimination by trespassing into the house of the landlord which was otherwise a restricted place to the tribals. This specific scene in the movie has been valorised as the subaltern's revolt against hegemonic power asserted by the landlord. Moreover, it became an embodiment of their protest against caste-hierarchy and power structure. In this phase, Siva, who was previously blamed for being reckless and irresponsible by his own mother renounces his heedless nature and embraces the role of a saviour. As the movie progressed to the climax it drastically failed to be a true narrative of resistance as it affirms the dominant upper caste ideology which advocates the preservation of hegemony. Siva transforms to *Guligan* to assassinate the landlord which points to the fact that the lower caste men have to be possessed by divine power to rebel against the land lord. The identity of Siva has been shifted

from a marginalized to a dominant position to voice against the power.

It underscores the existing debate in the discourse of subaltern's ritual performances where the practitioners belonging to marginalised communities have addressed the disguised presence of caste hegemony. These practitioners have suggested that the dominant caste treats them equally only during the course of ritual performances. Individuals performing the ritual earn respect and recognition from the members of the 'dominant caste' only while they are possessed by the divine power. Upon the culmination of ritual festival, the societal caste hierarchy, which got disrupted to certain degree, is reinstated to its typical structure and order. This cyclic process points to the temporary shift in the nature of caste dynamics that occurs during the ritual festivals. However, the marginalised communities will be relegated to their 'customary positions'. Similarly, Siva has to be possessed by *Guliga* to transcend the entrenched barriers of caste hierarchy and untouchability to assassinate the landlord.

The moviemakers have actively sought to label the movie as a narrative of resistance, however, a thorough and scholarly scrutiny unveils a notable divergence, revealing the movie's covert engagement in subverting the subaltern resistance. *Kantara* has been successful in propagating 'one-culture, one- nation' ideology. The film caters to the right-wing Hindutva agenda, which centres on the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra. Stringent mobilization of art forms and films plays a vital role to inculcate patriotism and religious sentiments to unite citizens of a nation. Dominant power structures attempt towards the strategical erasure of authentic narratives of the minorities to curtail existing cultural

plurality. Analysing and interrogating the link between art and the construction of nation one must arrive at the conclusion that art always encapsulates a propaganda to disseminate the ruling class ideology.

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