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07

KANTARA AS A CULTURAL TEXT: LITERARY, SOCIOPOLITICAL, AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Cinema has long been an influential medium in India, shaping narratives, participating in politics, and functioning as a cultural and socio-political force. It has absorbed the essence of literature, and in the modern technological world, it continues to follow Aristotle's idea of mimesis by reflecting social realities. This is especially visible in Tamil and Malayalam cinema, where the shift from commercial films to art-based storytelling has foregrounded contemporary socio-political concerns. Referring to Hippolyte Taine's theory of race, milieu, and moment, and also by using frameworks of Eric Hobsbawm and Pierre Bourdieu, the paper interprets Kantara as a cultural text shaped by invented tradition and cultural capital. This study examines Rishab Shetty as the author of Kantara. Although Rishab Shetty does not come from the lineage of Daiva Nartakas, his work is shaped by his milieu, as he belongs to the coastal region of Karnataka, where Daivaradhane is a living tradition. The moment, marked by the Tulu community's protests for cultural and linguistic recognition, also influences the film's thematic direction as their tradition becomes cultural capital. While Kantara is widely celebrated for its portrayal of coastal rituals and divine performance, the film also reveals significant issues faced by tribal communities. This paper explores how cultural, social, and historical forces shape the film's narrative and socio-political meaning.

Keywords

Cinema, Kantara, Mimesis, Race, Milieu, Moment, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The Kannada film industry has long been shaped by popular narrative structures and dominant ideological frameworks, many of which continue to influence filmmaking today. Unlike Tamil and Malayalam cinema, which frequently engage with socio-political issues such as caste discrimination, patriarchy, racism, and homophobia, mainstream Kannada cinema has historically avoided direct criticism of these themes. However, recent films like Kaatera, Kantara, and Kantara: The Legend Chapter 1 mark an important shift. These films begin to address issues such as casteism, untouchability, gender bias, and the marginalisation of tribal communities. Although Kantara approaches these concerns subtly, the film still acknowledges their presence within the cultural world it portrays.

The Daiva Nartakas (divine performers) belong to the Parava, Pambada, and Nalike communities, groups classified as marginalised and historically subjected to social exclusion. While Kantara celebrates the spiritual and performative beauty of Daivaradhane (Divine worship), it simultaneously reveals the discrimination faced by these communities. Kantara: The Legend Chapter 1, though not fully accurate as a historical account due to its commercial elements, can be

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read as a work of historical fiction that blends myth, memory, and political imagery. The film also reflects a deeper issue identified by several Daiva Nartakas (Divine performers), the forced cultural assimilation of their traditions can be discussed with Eric Hobsbawm's invented traditions theory. Through economic and social power, the priestly classes gradually intervened in Daiva practices that were originally autonomous and community-driven. As some practitioners note, rituals that were once conducted solely by Daiva Nartakas and villagers are now regulated by priestly authorities, who determine both the timing and the method of performance. This shift can be studied with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital, as the culture of these marginalised communities becomes their symbolic strength within ritual spaces.

This shift is tied to land ownership, institutional authority, and the appropriation of sacred spaces such as Daivastanas by dominant castes. These historical processes inform and influence the narrative landscape of Kantara and reveal how cultural practices are shaped, modified, and at times assimilated. This paper examines these elements to understand how Kantara functions both as a cinematic narrative and as a cultural text that reflects the socio-political tensions of coastal Karnataka.

Caste Hierarchies and the Politics of Ritual Space:

Casteism has been a social issue for centuries and has seeped into every nook and corner of Indian society. Though there are debates for and against the caste system, it is evident that it functions as an oppressive structure. At one time, the divine ritual of Daivaradhane was believed to be free from hierarchical divisions, but even this sphere has been influenced by caste and caste based discrimination. As the interviewee notes, "Until we are performing the kola, until we are in the daivastala, we are respected. When it is all over, our respect is too." Daiva Nartakas hold symbolic capital only during ritualistic performances, while dominant castes possess social and economic capital, allowing them to control land, institutions, and religious authority.

This sentiment is reflected not only in the statement but also throughout the film, where subtle yet clear hints point to caste hierarchy. A villager is slapped merely for entering the dani's (Devendra suttooru) house; people react with shock when the dani enters a villager's home; and similar shock is expressed when Shiva steps into the dani's space. The community that performs Bhoota Kola is revered only during divine performance, while outside the ritual space, they return to being socially marginalised. In the prequel Kantara: Chapter 1 – The Legend, Berme says, "They won't touch the things we have touched," subtly pointing toward untouchability. Although not historically verified, the film depicts tribal communities as subjugated. When Berme is handed the Shiva Linga, he hesitates and asks, "Can I touch it?," another moment hinting at caste based exclusion. The communities known as Parava, Pambada, and Nalike still carry these surnames today. Many express pride that their culture has gained recognition, yet they also fear that anyone dressing as daivas today dilutes both authenticity and cultural seriousness. Using Bourdieu's concept of cultural and symbolic capital, Kantara reveals how Daiva Nartakas command immense prestige during performance but return to marginal status afterward.

Cultural Assimilation and the Reinterpretation of Indigenous Traditions:

In both films, Dravidian native culture is shown being gradually assimilated into the Vedic order through the acceptance and commands of the Daiva (divine power). A cultural practice originally foreign to the Vedic system becomes adapted and incorporated into it, often portrayed as if it always belonged to that tradition. This assimilation, sometimes facilitated through economic pressure, political influence, religious persuasion, or assertions of cultural superiority, is not new. As the interviewee remarks, "Brahmins have made it their own culture; they now conduct kolas too, but the rituals are according to their convenience."

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The Daivas are depicted as Shiva Ganas, and there Is little doubt that Shiva is rooted in the Dravidian order, a deity historically worshipped by Dravidian communities long before the Vedic systems absorbed and reinterpreted him. Paadudhana, a vocal text containing the history of Daivaradhane, is said to have originally included only Shiva ganas. Later, Brahma ganas and Vishnu ganas may have been added to assimilate Dravidian culture, not through physical force but through religious or psychological influence.

The appropriation of Daiva rituals by priestly 'lasses reflects a transfer of cultural capital. Cultural authority is seized by groups with greater social and economic capital, illustrating a movement from Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition. Cinema, along with modern cultural politics, relies on inventing traditions to unify communities or legitimise identity. Several scenes in Kantara portray such constructed continuity between native Dravidian culture and Vedic narratives.

Masculinity, Tribal Identity, and Cinematic Representation:

The protagonist Rishab Shetty (in both the roles of Shiva and Berme) is portrayed in a strongly hypermasculine manner, raw, energetic, emotional, and close to nature, as tribal characters are often depicted. His motivations are frequently impulsive rather than calculated. He is shown hunting, drinking, and engaging in physical conflicts, and his early heroism is expressed through violence rather than political action. This raises the question of whether such representation is empowering or reductive. The film constructs the Idea of the "wild hero," an exotic and instinct-driven figure. This can potentially create stereotypes about tribal communities, presenting them as emotional rather than rational. Shiva, like the Daiva Nartakas, is respected only during divine possession; outside the ritual order, he remains socially powerless and economically dependent. Tribal masculinity is respected within ritual time, not in social reality.

At the same time, Shiva is shown to have emotional vulnerability, be wounded, confused, burdened with responsibility, and often drinks to escape conflict. His portrayal reflects the tension between modern law and traditional authority. Although Shiva embodies raw masculine energy, political power still rests with the dominant castes. His masculinity becomes a tool that can be exploited due to his economic dependency. This representation also resonates with Edward Said's argument that Orientalist portrayals often exoticise the other, embedding stereotypes and prejudices.

Gender, Agency, and Female Subjectivity in Kantara:

Although Kantara features strong women characters, such as Shiva's widowed mother surviving independently, the narrative space remains male-dominated. Female characters are often subjected to the male gaze, and some are shown within limited social roles. Leela, Shiva's love interest, holds agency initially as a forest officer. However, as the story progresses, her voice is overshadowed by the male narrative. Her decisions are questioned by the villagers and overridden by Shiva's masculinity. She becomes part of Shiva's emotional and social world rather than an autonomous narrative subject.

Leela acts as a counterbalance to Shiva, representing order and discipline, while the film portrays emotional labour performed by village women without exploring it deeply. In Kantara: The Legend Chapter 1, Kanakavathi appears powerful and strategically influential, hinting at female authority. The film also includes divine female presence, such as the portrayal of Kaali, who is worshipped in coastal Karnataka. However, despite moments of strength, women characters are positioned in a male-dominated setting that restricts their subjectivity. Though the women of Kantara or the village are treated as inferior, the men of the dominant castes abuse them sexually by setting aside their caste pride. This denotes the notion that practices and traditions can

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be modified in accordance with the dominant classes. Many major examples, such as the sambandham and Devadasi system, can be considered here.

The ritual space of Daivaradhane and Bhoota Kola is also male-dominated. Ritual authority belongs to men, who act as mediators between the human and divine worlds. Physical strength is idealised in ritual performance, and women have little involvement. For instance, the scene where Shiva's mother plays the taase is not reflective of actual practices, where women are excluded from ritual performance roles. Thus, while the film portrays some aspects of female agency, it does not explore them fully.

Cinema, Cultural Politics, and the Construction of Tradition:

Cinema is an influential medium that shapes narratives and asserts dominant ideologies. It constructs worldviews for audiences in the same way that literature does. For many viewers unfamiliar with Tulu Nadu, the film's portrayal becomes the reference point for understanding Daivaradhane, cultural practices, deities, and local social structures. Even when certain portrayals diverge from lived reality, cinema often becomes accepted as truth. This is how cultural narratives take form, or are sometimes distorted. Kantara transforms a local ritual into a cinematic spectacle. Once the film was released, debates emerged about the origins of the ritual, whether it was Dravidian, Vedic, or syncretic. Ultimately, the cinematic version becomes the widely accepted one. Cinema is capable of shaping ideologies, reinforcing narratives, or promoting agendas, making critical analysis necessary. Cinema can preserve culture or repackage it for broader consumption. Audiences tend to remember Daivaradhane as the film portrays it rather than as history records it. Cinema becomes a cultural textbook, curating and sometimes simplifying complex histories of caste, conflict, and cultural transformation. This aligns with Hobsbawm's concept of invented traditions.

Kantara also becomes part of the Tulu identity movement, influenced by ongoing linguistic and cultural demands. Cinema may also act as a political agent in caste negotiations. It can obscure caste realities or aestheticise them. In Kantara, divine authority often replaces social reform, offering spiritual solutions rather than structural ones.

Conclusion:

Although Kantara has brought the culture and practices of Tulu Nadu into wider visibility, an underlying sense of dissatisfaction remains among some practitioners and scholars. This paper has examined subtle details in the film through theories such as invented tradition and cultural capital, highlighting opportunities for further research. The film includes strong political commentary, yet some issues require deeper representation. As a commercial film, Kantara holds cultural value, but its depiction of socio-political and ritual dynamics calls for critical engagement. The cultural and socio-political elements present in the film make it relevant for academic pedagogy, particularly for teaching topics such as caste, gender, subjectivity, ritual studies, and the cultural politics of cinema. By blending entertainment with analytical insight, Kantara offers a productive space for teaching complex ideas. As the paper concludes, cinema and literature function as two faces of the same coin—both shaping and reflecting the societies they emerge from.

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