A Non-Take on Kannada Cinema

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BIPOLAR IDENTITY: REGION, NATION, AND THE KANNADA LANGUAGE FILM
By M.K. Raghavendra
Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 209. ₹695.00

In 2002, the Government of Karnataka prohibited the sales of a massive two-volume history of Kannada cinema published by Hampi University Press. It apparently had factual errors and, more importantly, had misrepresented Dr. Rajkumar, the Kannada film superstar. The prohibition still holds. And, well-documented work on Kannada cinema continues to be unavailable. A scholarly work on Kannada cinema, therefore, would normally be an occasion for cheer.

A dominant tendency within film studies has been to track the effects of social power and ideology in cinematic texts. Here, the emphasis is less on the aesthetic properties of cinematic images and sound and more on their institutional coordinates in social space. Bipolar Identity, too, intends to explain Kannada films as texts reflective of and engaging with local socio-political realities of their time. More specifically, its author, M.K. Raghavendra, notes: ‘This is an inquiry into how local/ regional identity is addressed in regional language cinema and also whether regional identity can conflict with the national identity/ other identities’ (p. xii). A few pages later, he says: ‘... the purpose (of the book) is to chart out the way Kannada cinema responds to both the region and the nation, or, to phrase it differently, how it negotiates the space between the two’ (p. xviii). He does not consider ‘Kannada art cinema’ relevant for his discussion since it was closer (especially after the late 1970s) to the ‘pan-Indian art film’ promoted by the National Film Development Corporation, and free from the compulsions of addressing a geographically circumscribed audience, and had ‘little local appeal’ (p. xii).

A brief summary of the book’s argument: Since the Mysore State was not directly ruled by the British, it experienced colonial rule differently than British India. It was a ‘Hindu’ kingdom. And, science and modernity came to Mysore much before Nehru introduced it in India after Independence (p. vii), summarizing the book here. All of these account for the differences in the film conventions (and ‘not form’) in Kannada and Hindi cinema in the pre-Independence era (p. vii). In the decades following the unification of Mysore State (later Karnataka) in 1956, the strong symbolic association of Kannada films with Mysore society began to wear off, especially post-1980. The changing economic, social and political trends in the newly unified State explain the shifts in Kannada film conventions. And, throughout this process, Kannada cinema managed to retain its local identity vis-à-vis the ideology of the Indian nation. A parallel point to note is that Kannada films have all along been ambivalent about Bangalore’s status as a Kannada city since it was initially identified more with the British than with Mysore and later became home to many central government public sector enterprises.

Bipolar Identity never clarifies whether the Kannada films themselves strove to manage their regional self-identity within a national frame. Retaining Kannada cinema’s distinctiveness and autonomy appear to be ever-present motivations for the Kannada film makers. A few historical facts should complicate such a view. Two Bombay-based producers set up the Surya Film Studio, the first studio in Bangalore, in 1928; and, their Surya Film Company produced numerous silent films in Kannada. Indeed, many of the landmark films of the talkie era were directed by non-Kannada speaking persons from outside Mysore. Sati Sutruchuna (1934), the first Kannada talkie film, was directed by Chamanlal Dongagi, a Marwari. And, Jeevana Nataka (1942), a popular ‘social’ film, was directed by Wabah Kashmiri, a native of Kashmir. Until the early 1960s, most Kannada films were made in studios in Madras. In other words, myriad non-local elements have mediated the making of Kannada cinema. Raghavendra simply presumes that the identity of Kannada cinema derived from the chief features of Mysore culture without showing how that might have been achieved within the complex field of film production.

What are the ‘constituent elements’, to use Raghavendra’s phrase, of Mysore society that made Kannada film conventions unique? First, the widespread practice of endogamy in Mysore society, whereby same-caste marital alliances were sought within geographically delimited areas, explains the presence of arranged marriages in Kannada cinema plots. Second, ‘early Kannada cinema is a non-Brahmin cinema’, wherein the identities of non-brahmin characteristics are used to suggest their vocation whereas the figure of the brahmin symbolizes caste hierarchy itself. Third, Kannada film narratives adhere to dharma more strictly than Hindi films since they came ‘from a space relatively insulated from the colonial encounter’ (p. xxi).

The sociological factors Raghavendra highlights relevant for understanding Kannada film conventions are not convincing. Caste endogamy obtained in most parts of India and was not unique to Mysore. Further, by examining caste through the enumerative logic of censuses in cinema, he misses out on the powerful work of caste in the aesthetics of representation. His thin understanding of caste allows him to conclude, incorrectly, that caste hierarchy weakens in Kannada cinema after 1980 (p. 95-96). A scrutiny of the metaphysics of caste underlying the cinematic Assemblements of image and sound can better explain the imbrication of Kannada cinema with local caste realities. Regarding the stricter embrace of dharma in Kannada films, I wish that the book also explained how that became manifest in ‘a non-Brahmin Kannada cinema’.

Raghavendra’s attempts to read Kannada films as an index of ongoing socio-political events stay tenuous. A sample illustration should suffice. After noting that women’s dignity was not always secure in films in the 1990s, he explains: ‘... the demeaning of women in the Kannada films in the 1990s was caused by a lowering of the self-image of the Kannadiga, which also reflects in the lowering of the language. The lowering of the self-image may have been the result of local politics in which politicians openly disguised themselves without being made accountable to the constituents of the region, who remained helpless. This perhaps led to public cynicism over whether the political choices that the public was..."
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making in the region had any significance at all. Was their characteristic tolerance such a good thing, they may have wondered, or were they merely pliant’ (p. 109; emphases mine).

How and why popular disgust with state corruption translates into popular self-loathing, which then necessitates the negative portrayal of women in films is not explained.

Again, speaking of Kannada films in post-1990 era, Raghavendra notes that ‘the state is perceived to be withdrawing from the public space’ (p. 135). This conclusion does not hold. Beginning with *Cham* (1995), many of the biggest commercial hits in the subsequent fifteen years have belonged to the genre of extremely violent films. Most of the violent youth heroes (or anti-heroes) of these films are arrested after enjoying a free hand at violence against the evil-doers. In other words, the narratives of virtuous young men’s violent confrontation with systemic evil close with an affirmation of faith in state-sanctioned law. Another feature of these violent films is their high-decibel symbolic designations of Bangalore (and Karnataka) as a Kannada space, which should qualify the book’s view that Kannada films have never been certain of the distinct status of Bangalore.

Identifying allegorical connections between cinema and society is another mode of historicism seen in *Bipolar Identity*. None of those allegories seemed plausible. For instance, the relation between Krishnadevaraya, the ruler of Vijayanagar, and his vassal in *Vijayanagarada Vangapura* (1961), we are told, allegorizes, respectively, the relations between India and Mysore, wherein ‘the Indian nation... deserves more loyalty’ (p. 17). It is difficult to imagine how Krishnadevaraya, a major Kannada icon, could represent the ‘Indian nation’ and his
vassal the Mysore state. Another illustrative excerpt:

The metaphysical agent rewarding virtue in early Kannada cinema was god—in mythological films like *Harishchandra* and *Bedara Kannappa*. If ‘king’ was a way of representing Mysore, then ‘god’ became a way of legitimizing the Indian nation after 1947 (p. 19).

Just how did the nation take the place of god? We will never know from this book.

Most conclusions in *Bipolar Identity* are not self-assured: ‘Early Kannada cinema... appears largely Shaivite cinema perhaps because (sic) of the dominant influence of Veerashaivas in Mysore’ (p. xxx). Again: ‘The motif of Bangalore gaining importance is perhaps because (sic) of the city’s position as the state capital and not due to any developments within the city’ (p. 33). ‘(The very many grammatical and typographical errors in the book show the publisher’s editorial indifference)... Yet again: ‘Many heroes today are from Punjab, Gujarat, or Bengal, as though the constituents of the region have an indeterminate identity’ (p. 158; emphasis mine).

An important claim in *Bipolar Identity* pertains to how the single-party rule by the Congress in Mysore and the absence of a strong anti-brahmin movement (like the one seen in Tamil Nadu), which did not polarize any other political constituency, help explain the iconic distinction of Dr. Rajkumar, the superstar of Kannada cinema. Noting that the superstar became the ‘voice of conscience’ in the late 1960s, Raghavendra writes: ‘... his adversaries are not identifiable as traders, landowners, the upper castes, or servants of the state, etc. (which are all political categories) but simply as “bad people”, who do things that are not legally and ethically correct’ (p. 38). This line of reasoning, which could found a valuable argument, remains, however, under-elaborated.

*Bipolar Identity* is silent on how the issue of Kannada identity was managed in film music. Kannada music directors have smuggled in sounds from Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and Hollywood films and brought newness to the local soundscape without overwhelming the integrity of the latter. Moreover, popular playback singers in Kannada films like P. Susheela, S. Janaki, L.R. Eswari, S.P. Balasubramaniam and Yesudas, to name a few, are from neighbouring states. Notwithstanding their occasional mispronunciations, Sonu Nigam and Shreya Goshal are singing sensations in contemporary Kannada cinema. All of this is public knowledge. Since music and voice are important authenticating signs of identity, examining the film-makers’ cultural diplomacy vis-à-vis Kannada identity in their movie soundtracks would have been valuable.

*Bipolar Identity* has been ill-served by its ready resort to de-contextualized analytical categories such as ‘caste’, ‘nation’, ‘region’ and ‘modern’. Despite its consideration of a wide range of Kannada films, its aim of showing how the history, politics and culture of Mysore/Karnataka mattered for Kannada cinema is not backed by careful research and analysis. For instance, in order to understand how Kannada film conventions evolved, Raghavendra chooses *Harishchandra* (1943) and *Gunasagari* (1953), which he thinks ‘may’ share in common ‘features characteristic of early Kannada cinema’ and then adds another film, *Visansathena* (1941) to this list (p. xvi). For him, these films also explain why early Kannada cinema was a ‘non-brahmin cinema’.

*Gunasagari* appears to have no place for a brahmin character, although there are caste indicators and the protagonist’s family can be identified as Veerashaivas. In *Visansathena*, although Charudatta is a brahmin the film plays down this aspect—although his comic friend Mithreya is often vocal about being a ‘poor brahmin’ (pp. xxxi-xxxii).

Referring to *Harishchandra*, the only film among his chosen films which depicts a brahmin as an evil person, Raghavendra offers an incredible suggestion: ‘Considering that the director of the film R. Nagendra Rao was himself a brahmin, the wicked or comic brahmin was perhaps a convention of early Kannada cinema’ (p. xxxi).

Indeed, there is an exciting story to tell about the formation of Kannada cinematic identity. An engagement with Kannada cinema that allows the intellectual problematic to emerge from within it, as it were, can help ensure it will be worth listening to.

Raghavendra’s bibliography consists almost entirely of publications in English. The existing archive of Kannada film magazines and the memoirs and biographies of Kannada film industry personalities might have enabled a satisfying engagement with the issue of Kannada identity.

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Highway 39: Journeys Through a Fractured Land by Sudeep Chakravarthi attempts to unravel the brutal history of Nagaland and Manipur, their violent and restive present, their uncertain and yet desperately hopeful future. The author’s journey introduces the readers to stories that chill, anger and offer uneasy reflection.

Fourth Estate, New Delhi, 2012, pp. 388, ₹450.00

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