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Film Review: Indigenous Epistemology, Media, and the Representation of Women in *Kantara*

Reviewed by Argha Basu[1] and Priyanka Tripathi[2]

Film Information:
Title: *Kantara*
Director: Rishab Shetty
Producer: Vijay Kiragandur
Distributor: KRG Studios
Release Year: 2022
Length: 150 minutes
Genre: Action Thriller

Abstract

Cinematic works around indigenous lives in India have long been marginalized within the scope of "film as an entertaining art form." Striking a balance between a faithful rendition of an indigenous community and the infusion of entertainment seemed impossible within the Indian film industry until *Kantara* struck the silver screen. Since its release, the film has been subjected to constructive and positive criticism, but the representation of women in the film has either remained unattended to or viewed negatively. This research paper intends to approach the use of indigenous media and epistemology in the film as a symptomatic representation of fourth cinema and then to address the representation of women from the perspective of faithful representation and indigeneity.

Introduction

The history of Indian cinema experienced a watershed moment in 2022 as the release of *Dhabari Quruvi* marked the inception of a novel tradition of indigenous people representing indigenous lived experiences in indigenous languages in Indian cinematic texts. During a round table at the 53rd International Film Festival of India in Goa, where it premiered for the first time, the director Priyanandan discussed his vision of using cinema as a medium for raising consciousness among people concerning indigenous cultures, lives, and conditions (PIB Mumbai, 2022). Despite being noble in its intentions, Priyanandan's credo suffers a tragic marginalization within the ambit of popular and mainstream Indian cinema. A surface study of the history of Indian cinema shows how the development of the mainstream film industry catered to the capitalist model of entertainment for revenue generation. The popular taste in the audience was created to cater to

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revenue generation. In the context of this focus on revenue, depicting the narratives of indigenous people becomes challenging. Being aware of the schematics of consumerist politics while remaining faithful to indigenous truth finds a balanced realization in the Kannada-language film *Kantara* (2022).

Globalization has not considerably aided the flow of indigenous narratives into the popular media and its various manifestations like news and magazine articles, literary texts, radio broadcasts, web series, television series, films, and more. This popular media space became accessible to indigenous people only after they were identified as "Scheduled Tribes" by the *Constitution of India* and government policies such as the Untouchability Practices Act, 1955, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 were introduced to uplift their conditions (Sengupta, 2013, p. 23). The total tribal population in India registers at 8.61%, and in Karnataka it is nearly 7% (Statewise Total & Tribal Population, 2011 Census). Their narratives have come down for generations through oral traditions and have constantly been subjected to changes (Iseke, 2013), but the sheer number of tribal groups and their parallel narratives and traditions render their culture significant.

Kantara in Kannada (one of the major spoken languages in India) means "mystical forest," and the film's subtitle reads "A Legend." Hence there exist several unauthenticated components within the narrative that invite elements of the fantastic and a willing suspension of disbelief on the viewers' part. Incidentally, all these imaginary or irrational aspects of the film can be considered to be manifestations of psychosis. Rishab Shetty, the writer-director and the protagonist of the film, managed this space of the unreal deftly. This entertaining film is immersed in the traditional practices of a peripheral culture of the indigenous people living in Tulu Nadu and parts of Malenadu of Karnataka (one of the Indian states), the tradition of *bhoota kola* (or *Daiva Kola* a ritualistic, stylized, animist dance performance in the honor of local deities), and the nuances of forest politics.

Despite its popularity, the film has recurrently been subjected to caustic criticism referring to its sexist representation of female characters, such as Leela and Kamala. Besides discussing the reflections on indigenous epistemology, the research paper explores the troubles around associating contemporary feminist concerns in India with the indigenous values of being. One of the idiosyncratic features of indigenous life is its essence of holism. Within the holistic philosophy, every living being is considered to be a part of the greater universal narrative. Categories of gender, class, and caste fall apart. Coexistence becomes the norm. Within indigenous communities, the roles of women are not determined by capitalist values. The nature of their crisis is essentially different. The tribal communities are patriarchal, but the status of women in these societies is not necessarily one of subservience.

In the majority of tribal communities, the patriarchal structure predominates, but in contrast to non-tribal women, women enjoy a higher social position even if they are not traditionally equal to males. Tribal women owe their relative social status to a mix of plentiful resources and a marked division between the home and the rest of society in their civilization. Women act as key decision-makers in the family's economy, production, and social relations, with men serving as the principal representative of the family in society (Paray, 2019). The discontent of women doesn't necessarily surface due to the equilibrium maintained by the socio-cultural and socio-economic system. Feminism is often viewed as a political consciousness, but the context of Indian feminism invites more complexities that differentiate it from the metanarrative of politics (Gori, 2021). Arriving at an understanding concerning tribal/indigenous feminism is not within the objective of this

research; rather, it argues that the criticism conceived around the position of two major female characters in the film does not necessarily render *Kantara* as a work celebrating aggressive masculinity. Both the making and the nature of the film drastically deviate from the mainstream cinematic works in India. The film harnesses an inherently indigenous sensibility. The article will initially develop a case to establish *Kantara* as a symptomatic work of fourth cinema (according to Barry Barclay's definition) and then will examine the complications of interpreting the film from a reductionist feminist perspective.

The Fourth Cinema

This article intends to reconfigure the theoretical model of "fourth cinema" as offered by the Maori director and writer Barry Barclay to approach and analyze *Kantara*. Though the idea of the fourth cinema as a genre emerged within the context of film production in New Zealand, I believe the principles espoused by Barclay will help us locate *Kantara* within the practice of indigenous epistemology. Following the classic Barclay model, *Kantara* would technically be viewed as a work of third cinema, belonging to the third-world national state, but the diegesis offers a few new perspectives. Barclay believed that fourth cinema would be a medium to celebrate indigenous values, perspectives, languages, and contexts. Besides offering a resistance to the previously existing models, fourth cinema will craft a fresh philosophical approach. Barclay focused on communication by and for the community rather than the purpose of serving the global audience. While most of these components pave the way towards creating a new genre of cinematic texts, the intention of consciously not serving a global audience undermines the awareness these works hope to promulgate. This inward gaze confers fourth cinema its identity but limits its accessibility and reach. If fourth cinema, as a new genre, aims at making indigenous lived experiences visible, then a balance between the mainstream audience desires and indigenous goals is necessary. *Kantara* strikes this fine balance with command.

Stuart Murray puts Barclay's arguments together and suggests that the fourth cinema is a medium of indigenous filmmaking for indigenous people. It creates resistance against the mainstream film that stereotypes indigenous people. It creates an indigenous gaze. The filmmaking is based in indigenous communities where the actors actively take part in the indigenous lifestyle to arrive at better comprehension. It erects a resistance against colonial histories, celebrates the use of indigenous language, and aims at developing a model of intra-community and inter-community communication (Murray, 2008). *Kantara* strongly reflects most of these qualities—self-sustenance, resistance against the Western narrative of development, a celebration of indigenous epistemology, and more.

The Narrative

The story-time of *Kantara* ranges from 1847 to the 1990s. The grief of a king and his search for contentment ends up in a deal with the tribespeople living in the forest. In exchange for *Panjurli Daiva* (a stone found in the forest while the king was traveling), an animist form of the spirit worshiped by the tribals, the king donates a considerable amount of the forest and promises to hold his end of their bargain for generations to come. Failing to do so would mean that the companion spirit of *Panjurli Daiva*, *Guliga Daiva's* curse would fall upon the king's family, resulting in catastrophic consequences. The king strongly believed that only the spirit could take away all his despair.

When a member of the king's posterity, guided by greed, attempted to take back the land during the 1970s, he died mysteriously. But a few days before his death, there was an encounter

between him and the *bhoota kola* performer during one of the performances. As it was believed that the spirit resides in the performer during the performance, he was asked to remark upon the land dispute between the tribespeople and the king's descendant. When the *Daiva's* verdict favored the tribespeople, the descendant doubted the authenticity of the process and called the performer's entire account fraudulent. Cursing the accuser, the *Kola* dancer ran right into the forest and disappeared. On a level of diegesis, the rest of the film is anchored around the life of this disappearing performer's son Shiva (played by Rishab Shetty) who partially witnessed the disappearance and was haunted by it. The rest of the film narrates Shiva's journey towards redemption.

Appropriating *Kantara* as Fourth Cinema

Kantara was conceived by Rishab Shetty, who identifies himself as a part of the community. During an interview with Anupama Chopra, he discusses his origin in the village where the film is shot, his ancestry, and how the entire film is a manifestation of his belief in his culture and his rootedness. He added that the entire team spent more than a couple of months in the village while shooting the film. When asked about the significance of the work, Shetty replied, "The more local, the more global" (Film Companion, 2022).

Figure 1: The *Bhoota Kola* Performer in *Kantara*

Source: Shetty (2022), image reproduced with due permission

Kantara creates resistance against mainstream films that stereotype indigenous people. The depiction of tribal/indigenous communities and cultures has suffered from the limiting interpretation of the monistic perspective in works like *RRR*, *Baahubali*, and *Raavan* (Sharma, 2022). *Kantara* actively contributes to the creation of an indigenous gaze. Indigenous life has long been portrayed as an antithesis to the non-native "civilized" existence (Taneja, 2022), and mainstream films often imply the need for a civilizing mission. The mainstream course of cinematic productions in India primarily caters to the populist taste of the audience and does not delve much into the struggle of telling hitherto unheard stories. The depiction of marginalized communities employs available templates where their lives and culture are reduced to an antithesis of advanced modern existence, awaiting a savior from the modern world (Taneja, 2022). *Kantara* marks a shift in this paradigm by celebrating the self-sufficiency of the community and their lives. It focuses on the self-contentment fostered by the agrarian life and completely resists leaving native land. When Leela (who studied hard to qualify to join the forest officer's team) was forced to vacate the land of her ancestors, the community asked her to give up the job. Similarly, when Guruva (Shiva's brother who used to perform the *Kola*) was offered money in exchange for a false utterance that would help Devendra Suttoru (the posterity of the King) to acquire the land by exploiting the faith of the villagers, Guruva denied.

The cultural dislocation of the film's audience does not affect the reception of the film as it depicts and savors essentially fundamental values (Vaad, 2022). The connection of the indigenous people to the forest vis-à-vis nature exists as a core of everyone's existence. When the protagonist Shiva lies down in the middle of the forest at night after realizing his follies or runs towards the apparition of the boar by overcoming the fear of it, or the forest officer puts his palms together in reverence of the *Daiva*, the audience is placed into the realm of faith and organic connection which is fundamental to human values. The film can be viewed as offering an indigenous approach to nature and natural resources (i.e. the New Environmental Paradigm[3]), which is a subversion of the Dominant Social Paradigm,[4] one of the cornerstones of technocratic civilization espoused primarily by the colonizers (Dunlap & Van Liere, 1978).

The poised acceptance of Shiva by the villagers during the animated manifestation *Guliga Daiva* and their confidence regarding their connection to the forest (which becomes obvious during their conflict with the forest officer) allows the indigenous faith autonomy. Their world of conviction is not measured against the rationale of the modern world of scientific advancement. Rishab Shetty embraces this earthly essence of the culture and stands true to its presentation. This motif is evident throughout the cinematic work, even in the dialogues or peripheral characters. Before his death, when Guruva (Shiva's cousin and a *kola* performer) was questioned about the authenticity of the presence of the *Daiva* in the performer, he unapologetically replied that it is the *Daivi*, and not he, who speaks during the *kola* performance (see Figure 1).

The film optimally represents indigenous concerns within the form of contemporary media. It successfully encapsulates and explores several culturally located traditions to save them from being lost into oblivion in one of the remotest corners of India, and in the process rekindles the interest of its audience in tribal media enactments. Considering media as any channel of communication or exchange of information that has the potential to reach or influence people (Stoltzfus, 2020), we can recognize certain acts throughout the filmic text that fall into the category of media representation and can be identified as indigenous media expressions. Indigenous media is a form of media expression conceptualized, produced, and circulated by indigenous peoples around the globe. It is a medium of communication, cultural preservation, cultural and artistic expression, political self-determination, and cultural sovereignty (Wilson, et al., 2014). The digital mediascape of *Kantara* preserves some of these practices. The film nurtures four distinct occasions where indigenous media surfaces—the reflection of indigenous ontology, the tradition of the oral narrative, the game of Kambala (see Figure 2), the *Bhoota Kola* performance and the animistic performer.

Besides being a space to resolve day-to-day conflicts under the guidance of the *Daiva*, the performance of *bhoota kola* is a secular gesture that narrates the myth of the spirit and fosters a message of inclusivity. During the first *kola* in the film, the audience can only see the villagers taking part in the festival but the concluding *kola* involves individuals from different walks of life despite their different philosophical and ideological orientations. One of the driving forces shaping the thrilling component of the film is the conflict between Shiva and Muralidhar, a Deputy Range Forest Officer concerning the right to the forest and forest resources. While the government with its forest and forest life preservation policies questions the acts of the tribal people as detrimental to the forest ecosystem, the tribals believe themselves to be an integral part of the forest cosmos. One dialogue from the film demonstrates this conflict:

[3] The new environmental paradigm suggests that all living beings manifest equal claims on natural resources.

[4] The dominant social paradigm harnesses the belief that human beings are superior and have more claim on natural resources than other living beings.

Murali: Do you have permission to take all this from a reserve forest?

The Villager: What for? Every year, we take all this from the forest for the Kola.

Murali: Don't you know it's an offense to cut wood in the forest?
...
Shiva: We have been living here long before the government existed (Shetty, 2022).

This difference is eventually amended when the true face of evil is unveiled to both parties in the form of Devendra Suttooru, the village chief, and his capitalist motifs of exploiting the forest. During the final *kola* when the performing *Daiva* holds the hands of these people on its chest and writhes in the glory of happiness, the communication completes a cycle leaving a message of peace and harmony.

Among other media devices, the game of *Kambala* is significant in the context of the film. It introduces the protagonist as a young man and captures the essence of the agrarian society. The spirited bulls demonstrated in this racing game functions as a tribute to the protector spirit for its blessing in keeping them healthy to aid in plowing. When Shiva and his friends were hunting animals or uprooting big trees, being oblivious to the nefarious schemes of the village landlord or falling prey to the carefree temperament of youth, some archaic media extensions surface, such as the shriek of the little girl as a warning sign, the sound of the movement, and the grunt of the boar.

Figure 2: An Annual Buffalo Race in *Kambala*

Source: Shetty (2022), image reproduced with due permission

As a considerable section of the film is set in the 1990s, the familiar media extensions used by the director are newspapers and telephones. The newspapers capture the nuisance created by these forest dwellers putting Muralidhar's career in jeopardy as the senior officer warns him against spreading rumors regarding the failure of the forest department to protect natural resources. A telephone conversation plays a key role in guiding the plot to reach a climax. When one of Devendra's minions calls him during a private conversation between the forest officer and another government official and leaves the receiver unblocked, the landlord overhears their plan of action and plots his vengeance. It simultaneously unearths the intention of the landlord to the forest officer and helps him identify the innocence of the villagers.

The use of oral tradition as a media tool and a part of the cinematic narrative is key to *Kantara*. Shiva is told the legend of the King and *Panjurli Daiva* by his father before his disappearance. The function of the oral tradition completes a full circle when Shiva and Leela's child is told about his father's disappearance by Sundara right before the curtain call. Within

indigenous tradition the orality of narratives holds significance (Gay, 2010) as every telling is individualized and becomes a personal narrative of one's experience and perspective (Asmi, 2017, p. 2). This becomes crucial in the understanding of the nuances of cultural practice and offers originality to the tradition. Murali's skeptical attitude towards the oral tradition and his questions concerning the validity of the oral narrative appear as a symptomatic representation of the first-world knowledge discourse:

> Shiva: How dare you speak wrong about our Daiva? Do you know the story of our God? Should I narrate the story to you?
>
> Murali: Somebody narrated it to your father and he narrated it to you. You have been roaming like a nomad narrating this story to everyone (Shetty, 2022).

The reflection of indigenous ontology covers three aspects in the film—the expansive notion of time, the interdependence of all matter on Earth and in the universe, and visions of multiple realities (Blackstock et al., 4). While walking with his parents at the beginning of the film when Shiva asks about the conflict between the villagers and the king's descendants, his mother replied, "But we're here to serve Panjurli. Where can we go forsaking our Gods? Son, do you know where we humans go wrong? We assume that we own everything around us. But we forget the true owner of it all. Once we learn the ultimate truth we can live peacefully" (Shetty, 2022). This in a nutshell suggests the awareness concerning one's insignificance within the unimaginable expanse of the universe. The interdependence of all matter on Earth becomes obvious through the changes in Murali as he realizes the position and values of the indigenous people and learns to respect them. The visions of multiple realities are manifested through Shiva's hallucinations. As a child he sees his father disappearing (see Figure 3), as a young man he keeps on seeing the recurrent vision of the *Kola* performer, in prison he sees his dead brother crying, and finally he has a vision of the boar attacking him. These visions come together when Shiva, lying in the middle of the forest, hears a voice saying, "Light. (the shriek). In light, everything is visible. But this is not just light. It's a vision. The light which will shine on the past and the future. Do you see it? (the shriek)" (Shetty, 2022).

Figure 3: Shiva's Father Disappears in the Forest

Source: Shetty (2022), image reproduced with due permission

Sound as a media device is crucial in the conception of this film. Though the sound is usually considered part of the entire audiovisual process and a catalyst that accentuates the visuals in Indian cinema (Chatterji, 1999), here in *Kantara*, some of the novel diegetic sounds (primarily screams) add to B. Ajaneesh Loknath's composition. Noise and yelp metaphorically contribute to

the viewers' comprehension. The introduction of *Panjurli Daiva* and its companion spirit *Guliga Daiva* is marked with a howling scream emanating from the *bhoota kola* performer. Through him, the *Daiva* commands the King to give the range of land (the jungle) to the tribespeople as far as the scream reaches. Following this, the rest of the *kola* performances showcase a series of yelps from the performers. In the climax sequence where the spirit of *Guliga Daiva* comes to life to avenge the death of the tribespeople, a series of different yelps surface. Every yelp reflects a different emotion (Film Companion, 2022). The uncanny nature of the screams as a symbol are analogous to most of the viewers' incomprehensibility of indigenous cultures and their distance from them. The initial obscurity of decoding the yelps is eased by the end of the film as a familiarity with these cultural practices emerges.

The film subtly offers an insight into the fabric of caste politics in these tribes. The binaries of the Brahminic and the non-Brahminic, the upper and the lower castes, become tangible. Shiva and his friends' departure from the landlord's house after a meeting is followed by acts of cleansing by a sprinkling of water from the Ganges (considered pure). The lower caste people are depicted eating their meals on the floor outside the house of the upper caste. But what the indigenous media space adds is a depiction of a Muslim man taking part in the rituals of the *kola* with a similar enthusiasm to that of a Hindu individual. It shows how within an indigenous space the divisions of caste, religion, and creed fall apart and give birth to a holistic life connected to nature.

The discussion suggests how *Kantara* surpasses the tradition of indigenous reflection in Indian films and becomes a symptomatic reflection of the fourth cinema tradition. The position of women in the film has been its Achilles' heel. Most of the negative criticisms around the film criticize the peripheral position of characters like Kamala and Leela. In an article entitled "The Immense Success of 'Kantara' Is Side-lining its Sexist Depictions" (Bara, 2022), the author argues that the film falls short of addressing women's concerns within tribal communities. Another editorial criticism condemns its celebration of toxic masculinity (Das, 2022). What these articles seem to miss is the metaphoric representation of the narrative. *Kantara* is built around the metaphor of *Panjurli Daiva*. A young boar was taken as a pet by Goddess Parvati. Eventually falling prey to its rudimentary nature, it started ransacking Kailasa when an angry Shiva killed it. Being shocked when Parvati resisted, the boar was brought back to life and sent to Earth to perform the responsibilities of a savior of people. This mythological narrative shapes the telling of *Kantara*, and Shiva in all probability is the symbolic representation of the boar who as a fallen man seeks redemption. When critics point to specific segments in the film where Shiva behaves as a brute (pinching Leela's waist to assert his masculine dominance), we must remember the makers intend the audience to loathe the protagonist. Within the ambit of the household (the position to which the tribal women are often subjected and limited), Shiva's mother Kamala is exceptionally empowered. Leela's entire journey in pursuing education to become one of the forest officers is indeed a tale of empowerment. Her decision to stand by her professional responsibility and put aside her emotional connection reflects a woman's strength and agency.

To approach *Kantara* critically, one must not forget the essential sense of indigenous values, lives, and authenticity associated with it. As a fourth cinema, it is faithful to the representation of tribal/indigenous life which can certainly be taken up as a partly appropriated mimetic reflection of a patriarchal community hitherto unknown. But the film introduces a new tradition within the cinematic landscape of India, as the representation of indigenous traditions in the Indian film industry usually gets castigated within a niche of parallel cinema. *Kantara* strikes a balance between the popular and the parallel. It allows a national and global audience to access the creatively adapted micro-processes of these indigenous cultures. It curates a space where they

survive independently rather than being appropriated or homogenized within the dominant narratives. Within the globalized spectrum, *Kantara* not only preserves the indigenous but also leaves a lasting impact on public consciousness through its narrative, spectacle, and blaring sounds.

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