




Who is Encroaching? Narratives of Land Encroachment in *Kantara*

INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER





About the Journal

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Journal DOI | https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha |
| Journal Home | www.rupkatha.com  |
| Indexed in | Web of Science Core Collection™ Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) |
| Journal Impact Factor (JIF)™ | 2022: 0.2 5 year: 0.2 |
| | Source:  Journal Citation Reports™ 2023 |

About the Issue

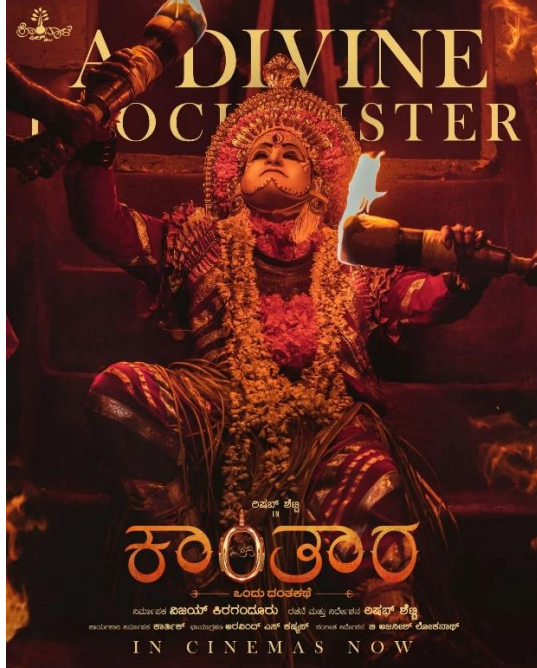
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| Issue | Volume 15, Number 2, 2023 |
| Issue DOI | https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n2 |
| TOC | https://rupkatha.com/v15n2.php  |

About the Film Review

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|----------------|---|------------|
| Title | Who is Encroaching? Narratives of Land Encroachment in <i>Kantara</i> | |
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| Review DOI | https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n2.03 | Pages: 1-6 |
| Full-text | https://rupkatha.com/v15n203  | |
| Full-text PDF | https://rupkatha.com/V15/n2/v15n203.pdf  | |
| Review History | First published 06 June 2023 | |
| Article Impact | Check Dynamic Impact  | |
| Copyright | Author/s | |
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Film Review

Who is Encroaching? Narratives of Land Encroachment in *Kantara*



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Abstract

This paper reviews *Kantara: A Legend*, a Kannada language movie, released on 30th September 2022. This anthropological action thriller is based on the culture of coastal Karnataka, however cultural borders between Kerala and Karnataka, blur in many places. It flags off issues of tribals, forests, land encroachment and the mythology of smaller hamlets in rural India. 'Kantara' has brilliantly manifested the subject of land encroachment using historical narrative. Here, we found three narratives of land encroachment: 1) the Narrative of land encroachment by the feudal Zamindar, 2) the Narrative of Land encroachment by tribals and 3) the Narrative of Land encroachment by forest officers/state actors. While themes of tribal assertion, misogyny, untouchability, women's empowerment and role conflict are meticulously discussed through character analysis of the movie. Most intriguingly, the ideas of spirituality and community consciousness are discussed through a mythological analysis of the Kola festival, which appears as a site of solidarity and togetherness among the villagers. Overall, these themes have been woven like a fine tapestry of music, dance and drama.

Keywords: land encroachment, community consciousness, mythology, tribal assertion, solidarity.

Introduction

Tribals are known as the aborigines of Indian society who predominantly live in the forest and mountain region and completely depend on nature for their survival. Tribal communities are mostly isolated and prefer autonomy over their livelihood patterns. However, interference with their autonomy and independence began with the British colonial administration of India; through encroachment. This practice continued after the independence of India using development-induced displacement. It has not only undesirably impacted their lives, but also destroyed their socio-culture, economy, history and memories. Awareness and interest towards 'other communities' is the need of the hour, which might be best projected through cinemas and documentaries. Cinema is considered one of the key media of public voice, which flags off the social problems and challenges of specific communities and provides a nuanced picture of society's institutions. However, issues of tribals, forests, land encroachment and displacement are rarely showcased by Indian cinema. With the release of *Kantara: A Legend* is a Kannada language movie (released in Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam also), written and directed by Rishab Shetty and produced by Vijay Kiragandur, under Hombale Films on 30 September 2022, is a remarkable entry into the cinema industry on the subject which has been undermined and neglected for long.

This anthropological action thriller movie is designed based on the culture of coastal Karnataka (Tulunadu). Thus, this movie demands critical academic engagement. It's a spiritual experience that is difficult to be described, rather than to be felt. It takes back to the tales grandmothers narrate to the younger generation, the folktales of Kings and Demons, of a spiritual connection between humans and Gods. Adjacent areas of Kerala hum stories of Kummatti Kali, Chakyar Koothu, Ottam Thullal, and the venerable Velichapadu. *Kantara* is set in the picturesque Tulu Nadu, which straddles the coastal region from Kasaragod in Kerala to Mangalore, Ullal, Udupi, and Kundapura in Karnataka and slightly beyond. The cultural borders between Kerala and Karnataka, blur in many places. The *Bhoota Kola* reminds of the Theyyam art form of northern Kerala, which is almost extremely similar in music, costumes and trance. It also mirrors Velichapadu, the oracle in temples of Kerala, who is possessed by the spirit of God and serves as a bridge between the Deity and Devotees.

Plot and Character Development

The film narrates a story back and forth dating 1847 in the Kundapur village of Karnataka, where the king being disappointed with his life, went in search of peace towards the deep forests. He came across Guliga Daiva amidst the forest. The king answered his inner calling and agreed with Guliga Daiva to trade the forest land to the local tribespeople in exchange for peace and happiness. Over the generations, in the 1970's the King's successor demanded the land back from the tribals and also warns the court to appeal if denied his legitimate land. Soon he dies a mysterious death, often narrated (oral history/folklore) as the wrath of Guliga Daiva. The king's descendants are not willing to honour that unwritten agreement, and as was expected of them, start demanding that the land be returned to them. More recently in the 1990s, Devendra (zamindar/successor of the king) hypocritically tried to get back the land in a deceitful manner (which includes treachery, murder and riots). On the other hand, the DRFO officer (named Murali)

vested with the duty of drawing the boundaries of the forest, soon locked horns with the local villagers, restricting them from entering the forest and securing woods/ hunting animals (which had been prevalent for ages). To make matters more complicated, a villager (named Leela) who happens to be the childhood heart-throb of protagonist Shiva, with the help of the zamindar's influence got the posting as forest guard. She is seen juxtaposed between her official role of demarcating forest boundaries and on the other hand, her obligations as a member of the community and village who needs to despise the tribunal of fencing forest land. Her character is depicted as an ensemble of feminine instincts with strong passion and commitment towards training and job. However, she is projected similarly to a concubine, who had an intimate relationship with the protagonist, beyond marital ties. Eve-teasing (pinching the waistline to express affection/spark) is also projected in a light tone, which gave way to love and acceptance. Misogyny of the society got reflected through the dialogue of the police, who assert that Leela has to satisfy Shiva out of love and satisfy the government out of Job. She is time and again asked to leave her job by both villagers and her lover. The DRDO officer suspended her for being disloyal towards her job, in trying to save Shiva from arrest.

Devendra (zamindar) wanted to seek vengeance against Daiva's fellow villagers for mysteriously killing his father, and he wanted the villagers to sell their land to him. He requested Guruva (Shiva's cousin brother, a man of repute and sanctity, whom the villagers worship as the performer of the Kola¹ dance) to convince the villagers of the same. On refusal, Guruva was murdered. Having learnt about Guruva's death, Shiva meets Devendra, who lies about Murali being Guruva's killer. Devendra and his henchman attack the village where an intense battle ensues. Shiva gets seriously injured and dies, whereas Guliga Daiva possesses him and decapitates Devendra and his henchman. Post this, Shiva performs Bhoota Kola, where he again gets possessed by the Daiva and disappears into the forest forever just like his father.

Shiva: symbol of tribal assertion

Rishab Shetty's storytelling is unparalleled, and so is his portrayal of Shiva, a person who oscillates between irresponsibility and divinity. The protagonist Shiva in this film has been depicted as the most powerful character; playing multiple roles as irresponsible youth who enjoy most of the time with his friends having alcohol and killing the animals from the forest. On the other hand, Shiva is an assertive person, a fighter who is much more conscious and aware of the rights of his people, voicing against discrimination practised by the Zamindar and his associates against his community members, by entering the house of the Zamindar and eating across the same table, exclaiming that 'zamindar can enter the house of tribals than why cannot the tribals to the house of zamindar.' However, such social distancing is presented as a taken-for-granted, mundane phenomenon in the village (which does not call for rebellion or remorse) but Shiva was the first to voice against it. Further, when the forest officer says that the forest is government property and tribals are using it without permission, Shiva revolted saying that the 'government must take

¹ **Kola** (also referred to as Daiva Kola or Néma) is an animist form of Spirit worship from the coastal districts of Tulu Nadu and some parts of Malénadu of Karnataka and Kasargod in Northern Kerala, India. The dance is highly stylized and held in honor of the local deities worshiped by the Tulu speaking population. (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buta_Kola)

permission from villagers to enter here because the forest belongs to them and they were here for generations.’ In the last scene of the movie, Shiva bravely fought against the goons of the zamindar when they attack the villagers in order to encroach on the forest land. He fights till the end and becomes unconscious while fighting. However, village ‘deiva’ suddenly appear and blow air from its mouth and then Shiva got up with possession of ‘deiva’s spirit and kills the goons and save the villagers from the encroachment of land by the Zamindar. Similar to other dominant Indian cinemas, this movie also depicts a male protagonist as a saviour and protector which represent the innate nature of patriarchy. This movie celebrates male supremacy and masculinity through the character of Shiva.

Women Empowerment, Misogyny and Role Conflict

Being a marginalized community, the tribals were far away from education which kept them ignorant for a long. In the *Kantara* movie, it showed that except for ‘Leela’, the majority of the villagers are illiterate. ‘Leela’ is an educated girl who aspires to join government services instead of joining the traditional occupation of her community. She succeeded by clearing the forest guard examination and joined the forest office of her village (through the Zamindar’s influence over posting) after completing her training. After, joining duty her role was jeopardized, by opposing role expectations. The forest department was against the villagers and it instructed her to follow the government order of land eviction. On the other hand, her family, villagers, and her beloved Shiva were not in favour of her job; knowing that she has been used against the villagers in supposed matters of land encroachment. They instructed her to leave the job. This situation puts her in a role conflict, whether to continue her job for which she has worked hard or to support the villagers. On many occasions, women have to sacrifice and are expected to compromise their position in such a patriarchal society. However, here it shows that Leela did not compromise. She was headstrong and balanced her duty with the community. This shows her courage, self-determination and right to choose her own life, projected as a good example of women empowerment. When the zamindar’s henchmen attacked the villagers, Leela being aware of her rights and obligations, first showed her assertion by throwing an iron bar aiming at the zamindar. The majority of female characters in the movie enjoy subordinated positions compared with the male characters, whereas the character of ‘Leela’ has been an exceptional one showing education and economic independence as an essential means of women’s empowerment. However, Leela has been projected as performing both household chores and her job which is a predominant picture of the majority of employed women vested with dual responsibility.

Narrative of Land Encroachment

Land and forest have immense value in tribal’s life which is attached to their livelihood, culture, religion and identity. Several battles have been fought; lives have been sacrificed to capture the land. In human history, ownership of land was contested by kings and their subjects; while presently the state and capitalists emerged as key competitors in this domain. ‘Kantara’ has brilliantly manifested the subject of land encroachment using historical narrative. Here, we found three narratives of land encroachment: 1) the Narrative of land encroachment by Zamindar, 2) the

Narrative of Land encroachment by tribals and 3) the Narrative of Land encroachment by forest officers/state actors. In this section, we have discussed how these narratives have established dialogue with each other through the idea of land acquisition. The zamindar's perspective suggests that the land belongs to him because it was owned by his ancestor who was a king and gave the land to the tribals being fooled in the name of 'Deiva'. Therefore, he leaves no stone unturned to get back his land. He wanted to establish his ownership of inheritance by preparing documents of his legal heir at the same time getting the consent of villagers to sign the documents (through gullible means). The second narrative is of the state, represented by forest officers. It shows that land and forest belong to the government and villagers have forcibly captured it without permission of the government. The state's perspective suggests that the state wanted to declare the region as a reserved forest by using its authority and rule of law. This step renders the zamindar's legal inheritance documents null and void, simultaneously conferring the tribals as criminal tribals who exploit forest resources and hunt wildlife in the name of survival. Several scenes depict the geographical region as unique and call for a sophisticated approach for the 'sensitive region'. However, power has no grounds for sensitiveness and sophistication. The third perspective is of the people, who consider themselves as real inhabitants of the forest, real occupants of the region, and who shared ancestral history, religion, culture, and memory with the forest. Therefore, the inhabitants consider the 'state' and 'zamindar' as outsiders and refute all other narratives. This suggests that the state has entered their territory without taking the permission of villagers. The tribal perspective focuses on the tribal autonomy over land and forest resources whereas the state claims to assert and establish its rule of law. The concluding scene of the movie depicted to is very interesting and leads us to develop a perspective of harmony and cooperation from the different stakeholders. It shows that after killing Zamindar and his goons, the villagers celebrate the Kola festival where 'Daiva' possessed Shiva and invite the villagers, and forest officers to hold their hands together on his chest; by giving the message of cooperation and integration. The movie develops this perspective that forests and mountains need to be protected along with animals and at the same time tribal/people who are living in those forests and their culture, religion, history and memories also need to be protected. Therefore, this demands understanding, cooperation, commitment and solidarity from all the stakeholders whether it is the state, the tribals or anybody else.

Conclusion

Kantara has shown what life in remote hamlets of tribal areas is all about - the humdrum of their everyday life, their rituals, their drinking habits, their food, their simple living and finally, their belief in the tradition and reverence for their Gods. There is also the way of life of the tribals in their hunting, their forestry produce, and their land – which the government believes has been encroached upon. Religion and religious festivals have great essence in the life of tribals. Tribal religion is associated with land, forest and nature. The Kola festival is a depiction of such a picture of coexistence of people, nature and mythical objects. The Kola festivals appear as a site of solidarity and togetherness among the villagers. Overall, these themes have been woven like a fine tapestry of music, dance and drama. Kantara takes folks back to their roots, traditions, and rich and varied culture. This movie resonates amongst the viewers as a cultural renaissance. The movie provides a perspective of cooperation and solidarity among all the stakeholders to tackle

issues related to forests. It makes us think about development and empowerment beyond displacement, deforestation and absorption.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank the co-author of this review Ms. Kanchan Biswas. Ph.D Research Scholar, Centre for the study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi- 110067.

A brief version of the film review has also been published in an academic student blog at <https://doingsociology.org>