Decoding the Identity of Bhoota to Gauge, its Impact on Bartamaan and Bhavishyat through Kantara

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Abstract

The term buta or bhoota represents perspectives which are multifaceted in nature. In Kannada, buta means ghost and or spirit. Semantically, it represents the notion of the Sanskrit word bhoota or the past. From another perspective, the word Bhoota is associated to the idea of Panchabhoota which is a combination of five elements which are represented by the sky, air, fire, water and the earth. While unfolding the layered meanings of the term buta or bhoota, there are certain queries that demand our attention: How can we interpret buta or a ghost in the 21st century in India? What is the relevance of buta or a spirit in the 21st century in India? Last but not the least, what is the significance of bhoota or the past on the bartamaan or the present and the bhabishyat or the future? Although there are several newspaper articles on the film Kantara, we are yet to appropriately ponder upon the cited questions in the form of academic research in English. Based on the Kannada Movie Kantara, I have essayed to seek the answers of the above mentioned questions. In this context, I have applied the qualitative form of analysis and consulted the concept of eco-Marxism to pursue my research.

Keywords: *Kantara, folk literature of India, tribal culture of India, indigenous culture of India, eco-Marxism*

1. Introduction

"Didi. you do not believe in bhoota?" Our helping hand Sarathi aunty asked me the question a few days back. "Oh come on aunty! In this era of 21st century, ghosts have vanished like dinosaurs. There is nothing called bhoota. Stop believing in these superstitions" I replied. She told me in a tone of warning: "Didi, though I have not studied much, I am telling you something which may sound audacious to you. Never say that

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Bhoota does not exist. Bhoota is immortal, he can never be vanished." Within a couple of days, while searching a video for my research paper, I coincidentally found the film Kantara on YouTube, that too the dubbed version. I watched the entire film which created a fissure between the versions of the author of this paper prior to watching Kantara and after her journey with the thought provoking story of the film. This article is the outcome of my deconstructed and reconstructed mind-set which is reflected in its title.

Before moving towards the next section of this article, let me share the story of Kantara in brief. A king who is blessed with a beautiful wife, a son and a kingdom where people respect him doesn't feel happy. He feels that peace of mind is alluding him. He leaves his palace alone in quest of happiness. But even after meeting several sages and going to several places he is unable to find happiness. Hence, the dejected king decides to enter the forest.

Figure 1. Scene from Kantara (2022) - YouTube Screengrab

There he finds a huge stone and feels the happiness for which he was yearning. It was the daiva of the villagers. The king tells them that being their King, he wishes to take the daiva with him and in return, he is ready to give them anything they want. Then one of those people becomes possessed with the

spirit of Panjurli and screams. His voice could be heard from far away. He demands that they would be the owner of the land till which the sound of his voice has reached and that if the King or any present or future member of his family tries to snatch the land from them, it will be disastrous for that person. He finally says that if the king accepts this condition, then only he will be allowed to take their daiva Panjurli with him. The king agrees and returns to his palace with the daiva. Thus, the King gets his daiva and the villagers get the land of the King. The entire incident takes place in 1847 (YouTube).

Figure 2. Scene from Kantara (2022) - YouTube Screengrab

In 1970, the future generation of the King's family comes to the village which is dwelled by the successors of those people whom the king met in the forest. He reluctantly attends the festival of buta kola or the dance of the spirit or the ghost. The spirit of Panjurli in the dancer comes to know from the young man of the King's family that he wants back the entire land which his ancestor gave them. Moreover he reiterates that in case villagers do not leave the place, he will bring court's order to take possession of the land. The dancer runs towards the forest leaving the festival ground and disappears. The villagers who ran after him find a ring of fire where the buta kola dancer possessed by the spirit of Panjurli had disappeared. Within a

few days, the young man from the King's family dies on the staircase of the court (YouTube).

In the present context, the current head of the King's family whose father died on the staircase of the court attends the buta kola festival. Apparently he portrays himself as the protector of the villagers and protest against the police who have the order to inform the government about the boundary of the forest. In that case any house of the villagers which comes under that boundary will be considered as encroachment which too is opposed by him. But in reality, he secretly wishes to snatch the land from the villagers for his own profit. With the flow of incidents, the villagers including the protagonist of the film Shiva who is the elder son of the disappeared buta kola dancer mentioned earlier comprehend the dirty politics of the current head. During the buta kola festival, he becomes the kola dancer although the role was earlier performed by his murdered younger brother Guru. Shiva, under the influence of Panjurli kills the current head of the King's family along with his assistants, runs into the forest and disappears. The film ends with the narration of the story of Shiva to his next generation (YouTube).

2. Review of Literature

Among the scholarly articles on Kantara, in the article titled "Deconstructing Kantara: A heady mix of Metaphysics, Local Traditions and Class Struggle", Sunayan Bhattacharjee and Amrita Chakraborty highlight the aspects of class struggle between rich and poor, cultural and philosophical representation of indigenous people and the dominance of men in the film (Bhattacharjee and Chakraborty). In another article titled "Who is encroaching? Narratives of Land Encroachment in Kantara", Kanchan Biswas and Dr Kumuda Chandra Panigrahi have touched the issues related to myth, religion, tribal issues and women empowerment (Biswas and Panigrahi).

Yet, there are rarely any article in English that deals with the questions cited in the abstract.

2.1 History is the consequence of people's actions and their forgetfulness

Figure 3. Scene from Kantara (2022) - YouTube Screengrab

When we try to define bhoota through the lens of kantara in the 21st century in India, the first and foremost word that strike our mind is history: the cultural history, the local history as well as the memory of the history. The cultural history of buta in this context is the tradition of buta kola which is the traditional local dance form of Tulu speakers of Tulu Nadu (Kerala Tourism) or more precisely the Southern coastal Karnataka and North Malabar region of Kerala (The Antique Story). This dance form refers to the invocation of local deities and spirits that includes Panjurli or the "wild boar offspring" (The Antique Story). In the film, Shiva who has initially been termed as good for nothing and someone who does nothing apart from drinking and eating, often sees the boar in his nightmare and in the forest and thus gets scared (YouTube). It is the same Shiva who was possessed by the spirit of Panjurli and saved the villagers from the then head of the King's future generation (YouTube).

It is believed that bhoota protects its worshippers and bless them (The Antique Story). According to the Tulu oral literature Paddanas, Panjurli is the wild mischievous boar offspring who was loved by Parvati and he was killed by Shiva. His death angered Parvati. Hence to appease her, Shiva brought him back as a spirit to send him to the earth not only as the protector of the people, but also as a guide of people towards the path of righteousness (The Antique Story). Evidently, the history teaches us not only to distance ourselves from being evil but also to follow the path of virtue. The question is: have we learned from history?

It is evident from the film Kantara that bhoota acts as the mirror of our conscience, i.e the capability of human being to distinguish between good and evil. This sense of conscience comes from memory. There were certain members of the King's future generation who opted for the path of evil. They forcefully denied and forgot the memory of the origin of the condition between the ancestors of the villagers and the King (YouTube). It is the memory of the peaceful coexistence of the ancestors from both sides as well as the measures taken by certain ancestors of the then future generations of the King's family to grab the land from the villagers and finally the fatal consequences of the betrayal (YouTube). Moreover, for every instance of injustice from the King's future generation towards the villagers, there has been the reappearance of the spirit as their saviour and as a torchbearer towards the path of justice (YouTube). Thus, history gets repeated generations after generations in the form of the struggle between oppressors and oppressed, between rich and poor or more specifically, it depicts an unending power struggle and identity crisis where the memory of coexistence is apparently one of the faded ones. In fact, the harmony between tribes and the higher class people is visible even in Ramayana too where Guhan the Nishada

King arranged boat for Ram, Lakshman and Sita to cross the river Ganges (Ramabadran). However, in his Ramrajya in the 21st century, we tend to forget the teaching that history has tried to inculcate from time to time.

Figure 4. Adivasis from Kodagu

Photo: Sowmya Aji

A newspaper article corroborates this repetition of history in the form of local history as it portrays the incident of the protest by adivasis in a small village of Kodagu district of Karnataka who are fighting against the government which considers all free lands that include barren areas too in Kodagu as the land of forest department (Aji). As a result, these tribal and Dalit people have been evicted and are now in a helpless situation. They are simultaneously protesting against the coffee planters who treated the tribal workers as bonded labors and forced them to work with a meagre amount of wage (Aji).

In another article, the plight of Gutti Koya tribe in Telangana has been depicted. They are facing eviction in Telangana to Chattisgarh (Minhaz). They had to flee from Chattisgarh and migrate to Telangana when the confrontation between Maoists and Salwa Judum started (Minhaz). Naturally, they needed land to survive. Moreover they had to depend upon the forest for

certain forest produce. However, as they were the comparatively new people in the locality, they were identified as encroachers, reason of deforestation and land grabbers (Minhaz). As a result, Telangana forest department has started the land reclamation process and consequently, several Gutti Koya people have become homeless (Minhaz).

Figure 5. Gutti Koyas

Photo: Ayesha Minhaz

Since according to the tribal culture, the notion of border is nothing but an artificial idea, the Gutti Koyas do not consider themselves as encroachers (Minhaz). Moreover, they are not considered as Scheduled Tribes in Telangana although in Chattisgarh, they enjoyed that status (Minhaz). Finally, a forest officer's death in Telangana for which the people of Gutti Koya tribe have been allegedly accused has resulted in the demand of evicting Gutti Koyas from the region and send them back to Chattisgarh (Minhaz). Obviously, their plight not only represents the age-old struggle between the haves and have nots but also our unending denial of the identity of the indigenous people and culture. Although we consider "unity in diversity" as the motto of India, in reality, in the name of development and the protection of environment, we are alluding the notion of homogeneity not only in the bartamaan but also for the bhavishyat.

2.2 An eco-Marxist approach to comprehend the message of bhoota for the bartamaan and bhavishyat

The political ideology of eco-Marxism is based on the Marxist approach of anti-capitalism along with the notion of ecology, anti-globalisation and environment friendly policies (Ntuli). Eco-Marxists are against the destructive economic and political system that according to them result in the degradation and continuous destruction of environment. Eco-Marxism highlights the fact that humans and nature are complementary to each other and therefore, the exploitation of one represents the exploitation of the other (Ntuli). When the capitalists rampantly cut down trees in the forests for industrial benefits that is considered as means of development of a country although their sustenance is not based on the products of the forest. On the contrary, the indigenous people, whose livelihood is based on the forests are becoming targets of the capitalist governments. From the examples cited by me in the previous section, it is evident that they are leaving no stones unturned to grab the land from these indigenous people in the name of reserve forest. In the film Kantara, we can see the young-man from king's future generation in 1970 comes from Mumbai and is hell bent to snatch the land from the villagers as he is sure that this land will help him to earn cores of money. His evil ideas ended in his untimely death (YouTube). Famous environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna said that "Trees are our natural dam and they conserve the soil and recharge our water sources and ground water. Dams gives us temporary solution and in turn they take away our fertile land and cut people off from their roots" (Sharma). He warned that by cutting trees by the government to create Pancheswar Dam and Char Dham Road, we are inviting more disasters like the

Kedarnath flash flood disaster of 2013 (Sharma). We did not learn from the bhoota or the history.

Figure 6. Joshimath Crisis

Photo: Zee Media Bureau

We did not learn to coexist with the nature despite the warning given by Bahuguna. Can we deny the reports that the "puncturing of an aquifer below the town due to the construction of an NTPC tunnel nearby may have been an immediate cause" (Bhuraita) of the sinking of Joshimath in December 2022 and January 2023? (Bhuraita)

Kantara means a forest as well as a symptom. It is intriguing to see whether the film which has garnered enthusiasm among people and has become a box-office hit throughout the country, can in reality act as an eye opener for those people of the 21st century in India who equates development with capitalism. Will the concept of the film which I find resembles to the notion of behalfism as coined by Salman Rushdie (Nayar): in this context, the behalfism for the eco-Marxists be able to influence in reality the capitalists along with the environmentalists to introspect and realise that human and nature are inseparable and thus, would lead these capitenvironmentalists towards a paradigm shift? I believe that

the findings of my research will lead to carry on further research to throw light on the query raised in this concluding section.

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