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NATION, GENDER IN KANNADA HISTORICAL CINEMA OF THE 1960S

SUKANYA KANARALLY

Visiting Scholar, Victoria University of Wellington

Abstract

The relationship between history and narrative cinema is fraught with distrust and indifference if not with hostility. To what extent is this an ‘unholy’ alliance? What function has the historical cinema served in Kannada, particularly in the 1960s during which the newly formed linguistic state witnessed a series of such films? What are the political and cultural commissions and omissions of such cinema? These are the few questions this chapter tries to answer along with analyzing the nation-gender as a cine-political aesthetic in the only woman-centered historical film in Kannada, *Kitturu Chennamma* (Chennamma, The Queen of Kitturu, 1962).

Keywords: Kannada, Nation, Gender, Historical Cinema.

Introduction

A question that merits attention while deploying the concept of ‘region’ is if we are trying to map a contemporary political category on to a reading of the past. Secondly, as much as the ‘nation’ cannot be contained within the physical boundaries, ‘region’ too is not merely a geographical feeling. Even if ‘region’ as a construct may have merely served the purpose of administrative convenience of the colonial and the postcolonial state, we need to concede that such a construct may also be deployed to counterbalance the totalizing unity of ‘nation’ by foregrounding the aesthetic and political of the ‘regional’. We may recall David Jordan’s observation that the term “regionalism” has been used recently ‘in a metaphoric sense to allude to any marginalized “space.”’¹ Yet, the ‘regional,’ as much as it is a resistant marginal to the hegemonic core, is also an attempt to forge and preserve a distinct community identity. Whether or not ‘region’ is an ‘ideological category’² by itself, spatially considered, ‘region’ is a capsule form of nation and ideologically suffers from the same ills.

1 David Jordan, *New World Regionalism: Literature in the Americas*, Toronto, 1994, p. 9.

2 According to Raymond Williams, ‘certain places are “regions,” with a recognized local or provincial character, while certain other places are not. Second, only certain novels are ‘regional’ in the sense that they tell us primarily, or solely, about such places and the life lived in them, rather than about any more general life. Third, that one kind of novel is ‘regional’ because it is ‘about’ or ‘set in’ some specific social life, as distinct from novels which address broader and more permanent kinds of human experience.’ See his ‘Region and Class in the Novel,’ in *The Uses of Fiction: Essays on the Modern Novel in Honour of Arnold Kettle*, in Douglas Jefferson and Graham Martin, ed., Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1982, pp. 59-68, p. 59.

Hence 'region' as a linguistic nation, is a discourse produced by the 'nation' itself. Just like nation, region is neither a given nor a mere reference to a geographical entity, but produced by several socio-political discourses that produce 'cultural differences' and mark and maintain their boundaries.³ Regional identities or the formation of local communities according to Arjun Appadurai are thus 'relational and contextual.'⁴ The debate over subnational identities cannot be dismissed as a postcolonial or postmodernist phenomenon nor as caused by globalization, as anticolonial nationalism was 'always already fragmented' and therefore the nuances of resistant regional identities need to be 'located within the framework of a variegated, decentred nationalist history.'⁵

As far as Indian cinemas are concerned, the seemingly 'national' Hindi cinema is, in real, 'non-regional' or 'non-local'. Like Sanskrit, and like English, it has acquired its 'pan-Indian' power through its fragmented presence. Further, as Karen Gabriel observes, 'the construction of all Indian cinemas, except Hindi cinema, as regional (versus national) is as troublesome as, and concomitant with, the construction of all parts of India except the northern Hindi-speaking states, as regional.'⁶ However, cinema in Kannada, unlike literature, had not been able to contest the concept of 'regional South' due to the presidency style of filmmaking. In other words, Kannada cinema explicitly identified with its own regionalist aspirations only in the 1960s when the film production was shifted to Karnataka. This coincided with the linguistic state coming into being on November 1, 1956.

Though the formation of region was promoted for the purpose of 'identifying certain specific problems and solving them',⁷ and even if that purpose was primarily 'economic' and 'developmentalist',⁸ the region had to refashion its people as a nation.

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- 3 James Overton, 'Rethinking Regionalism: A Critique of Ralph Matthews' The Creation of Regional Dependence,' *Journal of History and Politics*, 9, 1991, pp. 65-113, p. 97-98.
 - 4 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p.178.
 - 5 John Zavos, Andrew Wyatt, & Vernon Hewitt, eds., *The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 8.
 - 6 Karen Gabriel, *Melodrama and the Nation: Sexual Economies of Bombay Cinema, 1977-2000*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2010, p. 9-10.
 - 7 G. Aloysius, 'Conceptualizing the Region,' Working Paper, No.2, Centre for Regional Studies, University of Hyderabad, 2006, p.10
 - 8 P. Thirumal discusses the formation of a region called Karnataka in his 2 part essay that looks into the editorials of an English Daily in Karnataka called *Deccan Herald* for a period of 26 years (1956-1983). The core argument of Thirumal's is that it is the administrative region that is primarily responsible for the reproduction and transmission of postcolonial region/s and that the purpose for mobilizing the regional community in the initial years after Independence was to facilitate the building of a national/regional economy. Though linguistic mobilisation triggered the establishment of the State Reorganisation Commission, the main impetus for the formation of linguistic states came from administrative and economic reasons rather than cultural issues since the developmental State considered regions as smaller replicas of the Nation itself. Thirumal cites The Dhar Report (1948), JVP Report (1952) and the State's Reorganisation Commission Report (1956) in support of this observation.

And it was imperative that language among other categories like religion, caste, class, and gender that implicitly structured this construct, be deployed as a mobilising force for affirming the identity of this region. Kannada historical cinema, particularly of the 1960s, was an important discourse that majorly focused on culturally and emotionally integrating the erstwhile disparate parts into a 'region-nation'.

Indian Nation and Kannada 'Region'

Karnataka, originally known as the State of Mysore, is a state in the south western region of India. The state covers 5.83 percent of the total geographical area of India. In area, it is the seventh largest state and in terms of population, it is the eighth largest. Kannada, considered to be one of the classical languages of India, is the widely spoken language.

After the fall of Tipu Sultan in 1799 who had fought four wars against the British, the Kingdom of Mysore was restored to the Wodeyars. With a gap of fifty years in between (1831-1881), it was Princely Rule with an overseeing British Paramountcy that marked this region until 1947 when India attained its nationhood and 1950 when the princely state became a part of Indian nation.

Modern regional identities in South Asia, being the products of the encounter with modernity and colonialism, developed 'not as a subset of the "nation" with differing local flavours, but were actively produced in conjunction with nationalism.'⁹

8 (cnd) Thirumal concedes that 'ordinary people have no access to high literature or art but they access images of the region through a variety of popular significations and practices like official architecture, public transport, electricity and water services, formal school education and health services and so on.' Despite observing that 'communication constitutes nations, regions and village societies as well', one important discourse is left out of this list: cinema. Thirumal uses the editorials of an English Daily *Deccan Herald* that frames Karnataka as a politico-economic region rather than as a cultural-historical region. Kannada cinema of the 1960s and 70s popularly manage the other half by invoking the cultural and historical aspects of the region, perhaps due to their respective medium-specificity. While the print medium like *DH* emphasises on integrating the sub-regional economies with the regional economy through 'extracting iron ore in Hospet and gold in Kolar, carting coffee from Malnad, building steel and fertilizer plants in Bellary and Mangalore' Kannada historical cinema focused on integrating the erstwhile disparate parts of a region into a 'region-nation'. See P. Thirumal 'The Making of the Region: Perspectives from a Non-Savarna Newspaper', published, 24 November, 2016, accessed, 20 May, 2018. See https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8874:the-making-of-the-region-perspectives-from-a-non-savarna-newspaper-part-i&catid=119&Itemid=1328

9 Prachi Deshpande, 'Narratives of Pride: History and Regional Identity in Maharashtra, India c. 1870-1960', Ph.D. Dissertation, Tufts University, 2002, ii. Also see Janagere Venkataramaiah, ಕನ್ನಡ ಚಳುವಳಿ ಇತಿಹಾಸ (History of Kannada Movement), Bengaluru: Kannada Sahitya Parishat, 2011, p. 3.

Sub-nationalist arguments began during the nationalist phase and it was strongly favoured as an imperative for the economic, cultural, and political wellbeing of the whole state itself.¹⁰

It is Nrupatunga's *Kaviraja Marga*, a literary classic of the ninth century (814-877 A.D.) that mentions Karnataka as a geographical entity. As K.V. Subbanna states, 'The integrated Kannada kingdom that Nripatunga had built during his time disappeared after his passing. Later, a similar Kannada land as seen in the map ... has been seen 11 centuries later in 1956, in our own times.'¹¹ The evolution of this geographical entity into a cultural and political reality began as early as 1890 through an organization that intended to promote the development of Kannada language and culture and the idea of a united Kannada state called 'Karnataka Vidya Vardhaka Sangha' in Dharwad. With its own twists and turns for about four decades, the Constituent Assembly of Mysore passed a resolution in 1948 that 'the neighbouring regions of Mysore should be joined with Mysore according to the wishes of the people of those regions.'¹² This was agreed upon with the view that a unified linguistic state would facilitate the development of Kannada state in all fields. The unification movement, however, involved Kannada people outside Mysore as well. The State Reorganization Commission published its report in 1955 favouring the formation of a singly unified Kannada state. This report produced mixed reactions among several North Karnataka leaders. Not all seemed to favour it in Mysore either. There was a suggestion that there should be two Kannada states – one, the old Mysore and the other comprising the rest.

Towards the end of 1955, there was a sub-committee of four members nominated by the Congress Working Committee that criticized the separatist demands and voted for the establishment of a united Kannada state. This put to rest the demand for another state and the new Mysore State came into being on 1st November 1956. Thus what began in the last decade of the 19th century saw the formation of a linguistic state in the beginning of the latter part of the 20th century.¹³

10 For an illustration of these arguments, see Prerna Singh, 'Subnationalism and Social Development: A Comparative Analysis of Indian States', Ph.D dissertation, Princeton University, 2010. She argues that the 'cohesiveness of subnationalist identification influences both the progressiveness of state social policy as well as the extent of collective action on the part of citizens to monitor the public services provided by the state, which together give rise to very different levels of social development' p. ii). She charts out how a strong sense of subnationalism resulted in the significant social achievements in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, while a fragmented subnational identity in abysmal levels of social development in Uttar Pradesh.

11 K.V. Subbanna, Prakash Belavadi (tr.) 'From the Award-winning Book ಕವಿರಾಜಮಾರ್ಗ ಮತ್ತು ಕನ್ನಡ ಜಗತ್ತು (Kaviraja Marga and the Kannada World)', *Indian Literature*, 48/4, 2004, pp. 100-107, p. 105-6.

12 Diwakar, R. *et al.* ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ ಏಕೀಕರಣ ಕಥೆ (Story of Unification of Karnataka), Hubli: Lok Shikshana Trust, 1956, p. 67.

13 It is not however, a 'happily ever after' fairytale. As much as there were suggestions to make more than one Karnataka before the formation of linguistic state, demands from a separate state have emerged from several areas like Kodagu, North Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, Tulu Nadu, Coastal regions, and Malnad after the formation of Karnataka too.

The rise of modern Kannada consciousness in the writings of several mainstream Kannada writers [like B.M. Sri or K.V. Puttappa] was mainly in terms of a sub-national derivative of Indian nationalism. The most familiar metaphor to describe Kannada character was to evoke the image of a daughter or younger sister of ‘Bharatha Matha’. A well-known song by Kuvempu [K.V.Puttappa] which is acknowledged as the *naadageete*—the regional anthem—begins thus: ‘ಜೈ ಭಾರತ ಜನನಿಯ ತನುಜಾತೆ, ಜಯಹೇ ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ ಮಾತೆ’—Victory be to Mother Karnataka, the daughter of Mother India. Thus the nation-region in case of Kannada has been forged on a familial relationship, one that played a subversive role against the divisive colonial designs.¹⁴

How ‘Kannada’?

Indian cinema was born at the site of encounter between a technological innovation that was foreign and an adaptation that had to be nothing but domestic. Hence it cannot be looked at as an independent art form. Silent cinema, according to Kannada film historians, was the one, next to the nationalist struggle, that brought about a sense of fraternity and solidarity in India.¹⁵ According to Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, ‘An Indian sense of community has been especially fostered by common cultural legacies, among the most remarkable of which have been the great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata,’ a ‘bond that had magnificently served silent cinema.’¹⁶

The advent of ‘talkie’ did bring about a ‘discord of tongues’, but also ‘inherited something more powerful and broad-based. Into the new medium came a river of music that had flowed through unbroken millennia of dramatic tradition.’¹⁷ Thus, narration, dialogue-delivery, songs found their place on a completely experimental basis. Borrowing safely from the Company Nataka tradition that avoided the mainstream narratives of epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Kannada cinema narratives were chosen from the repertoire of less known sub-narratives that lent themselves to the desired cinematic interpolations. In the words of a renowned literary critic in Kannada like Keertinatha Kurtukoti, ‘Company natakas chose mythological narratives only as a fodder for their religious sentiments. More importantly they provided the spectacularity that the audience needed with the supernatural powers appearing and disappearing at will.’¹⁸

14 Trying to look into the literary, iconographic and other representations in order to unpack the processes and discourses of constructing the regional and national ‘mothers’, T. Satynath interestingly argues that the forging of fictitious kinship relationship between the ‘region’ and nation ‘also appears to have had a significant subversive effect on one of the most celebrated constructions of colonial and orientalist discourse, the Indo-Aryan Dravidian split.’ See T. Satynath, ‘Nadu(s) and Desa: On the Construction of Regional and National Identities in Modern Kannada Representations’, *Indian Literature*, 53/1, 2009, pp. 209-219, p. 214.

15 Vijaya *et al.*, ಕನ್ನಡ ಚಲನಚಿತ್ರ ಇತಿಹಾಸ (History of Kannada Cinema), Hampi: Kannada University, 2001, 2, p. 2.

16 Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963, p. 60.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

18 Cited in Vijaya *et al.*, ಕನ್ನಡ ಚಲನಚಿತ್ರ ಇತಿಹಾಸ, 1, p. 40.

Mythologicals were thus good 'stunt' films. Used to the 'stunt' aspects of the silent era, the spectator very soon got used to 'dialogues' and 'costumes' along with 'devotion' and 'sati-hood' that these films foregrounded. Nevertheless, through such a production and perception, Indian cinema(s) on the whole, had inscribed their own conventions on cinema in a way that was unique. Even if the theatre was more accommodative to the subversive potential of the medium and thereby the alternative discourses, the 'mainstream' early cinema in Kannada by virtue of being more capital-intensive and reaching a huge audiences was more focused on 'entertainment' and instructional content. The spectacular actions and the addressed spectatorship proved to be the key constituents of such cinema.

To argue that Kannada cinema enjoys an 'organic' relationship with the socio-political and cultural territory called Princely Mysore earlier and Karnataka later is to ignore the trajectory of Indian cinemas that share several commonalities. These commonalities were as much between different South Indian languages as they were with 'Bombay' cinema that functioned as site of production and exploration of national identity and ideology. According to Madhava Prasad,

The cinemas of India, in spite of significant differences, share a common ground, a set of aesthetic concerns, certain dominant tendencies, which show that ... Indian cinema had evolved a particular, distinct combination of elements, putting the technology to a use that, whether consistent with the camera's ontology or not, was consistent enough over time to suggest ideological effectivity.¹⁹

Further, as far as reception is concerned, given the shared economic concerns in South India like a single production in multiple languages, at least the early Kannada cinema was not made by the 'region' and for the 'region'. How 'kannada' was Kannada cinema? Low capital, a hospitable permission to use the same sets in Madras Studios, and presidency style film making undermine any such organicity or distinctiveness. Kannada cinema, thus, at least in its early years, had been, in terms of production, distribution,²⁰ narratives and actors,²¹ a mere linguistic marker rather than an attribute of unique identity. Despite several shifts in narratives and techniques, there was no conscious intellectual or ideological coherence behind those ventures and productions.

19 M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 5.

20 Interestingly the first Telugu language film Bhakta Prahlada (1931) and the first Tamil language film Kalidasa (1931), both shot in Maharashtra, were directed by H.M. Reddy, a Kannadiga. He was born, received his education and worked in the Dept. of Police in Bangalore, but later travelled to Bombay and worked in Imperial Film Company. See Vijaya *et al.*, *Kannada Chalanachitra Itihasa* (Kannada Film History, hereafter KCI), 2 Volumes, Hampi: Kannada University, 2001, 1, p. 13. Further, the first two Kannada language films

Kannada Cinema and the Indian Nationalist Struggle

Rajakrishnan in his 'Is there an Indian Political cinema?' argues that the nationalist movement has inspired Indian cinema only to the extent of being deployed as a backdrop to narratives drenched in sentimentality. According to him, 'Films which plumb the depths of vengeance and vendetta of the North Indian villages during the Partition of the country are all too rare either in Hindi or in the regional languages – notwithstanding *Garm Hawa*, which is a memorable exception.'²² Further, in his opinion, Indian cinema trails far behind literature as illustrated by a comparative study since the 1950s.²³

With the mythologicals dominating the horizon in the early years starting from the 1930s, Kannada cinema, appears to be glaringly 'apolitical' if not un-nationalist. From 1934 when its first talkie arrived, to 1947 – the pinnacle moment in the history of

20 (*cid*) were directed by non-Kannadigas. Bhakta Dhruva was directed by Parshwanath Altekar Jain who was born in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. See Kannada Vakchitra, February 1945 cited in KCI, 1, p. 14. And the first ever Kannada language film to be released was directed by Y.V. Rao, yet another non-Kannadiga. And even the producers for these two first two films in Kannada were non-Kannadigas. Interestingly, as much as the first silent film in Kannada Vasantasena was made by a team of non-Kannadigas, even the genre of 'new' cinema that began with Samskara and identified as 'regional' cinema for its rootedness in the regional socio-cultural ethos as far as production was concerned, was a mélange of people from different linguistic-cultural backgrounds. The director of the film Pattabhi was a telugu, Snehalata Reddy, his wife who played the role of Chandri was 'allegedly' a Bengali, the cinematographer Tom Cowen was an Australian, producer-distributor Surendranath was a 'telugu'; the assistant director Singeetam Sreenivasa Rao too was a non-Kannadiga who did not know to speak Kannada. According to Girish Karnad, the director of the film, 'With Pattabhi, Cowen, and Singeetam, the entire team became non-Kannadiga.' See Karnad's autobiography ಅಡಾಡತೆ ಅಯ್ಯಪ್ಪ, Dharwad: Manohara Grantha Mala, 2011, p. 228.

21 Even as late as 1956 (after 2 decades), there weren't many original narratives anchored in Kannada context. As much as stories were borrowed, so were the actors. Women actors were majorly from Telugu. Their Kannada roots were, if any, laboriously excavated to prove some authenticity to Kannada cinema. And the audience too strangely preferred Telugu heroines. Even Tamil did not have a major heroine from its own culture during those days. See Vijaya *et al.*, KCI, Vol. 1 p.107.

22 V. Rajakrishnan, 'Is there an Indian Political Cinema?' an excerpt from *Kazchayute Asanti*, a collection of essays on the sociology and language of cinema, Cinema in India, 2: 4, 1988, pp. 32-39, p. 33.

23 But in the realm of Kannada literature one does not see active participation in the nationalist movement. H.Y Sharada Prasad writes, 'Very few literatures of India bear such little impact of the nationalist movement, of the tremendous personality of Mahatma Gandhi.' See H.Y. Sharada Prasad 'A few inches of ivory: A profile of modern Kannada literature,' *India International Centre Quarterly*, 14:2, 1987, pp. 119-131, p. 122. According to Srinivas and Panini, 'Karnataka, in contrast to Tamil Nadu and Kerala, has not been hospitable to radical social movements. ... [It] has proved to be a notoriously barren field for leftist social scientists.' See M.N. Srinivas and M.N. Panini 'Politics and Society in Karnataka,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19: 2, January 14, 1984, pp. 69-75, p. 69.

freedom struggle --there seems to be a cinematic insularity from the sites of nationalist struggle, for the staple folk and mythological mix that Kannada cinema doled out – a mix that by and large hinges on loyalty to the structure of powers – neither deployed the subversive potential of these themes that served the transition from ‘God’ to ‘nationhood’, nor openly took them up until *Mahatma Kabir* (1947) appeared to make a plea for communal harmony. So strong was the fascination for the folk-mythological mix that even *Mahatma Pictures* that came into being in 1947 with an intent to produce ‘nationalist’ cinema ended up producing more mythologicals than any other.²⁴ Kannada mythologicals, thus remained ‘merely mythological’. In sum, Kannada cinema of the 1930s and 1940s does not, in any significant way, concern itself with the travails and tribulations of a nation in making.

Kannada Cinema Engages the Kannada Nation

The rise of ‘Kannada-consciousness’ in Kannada cinema began with the protest against the poor support extended towards screening Kannada films. During the early 1960s, most of the theatres screened Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi films and among the meagre Kannada films that were screened, most of them were dubbed from other languages. Kannada movement picked this issue up as a major anti-Kannada issue and held demonstrations at several theatres. Nadigera Krishna Rao who spearheaded the movement stated with an explicit threat: ‘It is not enough we have mere Kannada in the films we watch. They should, instead, portray Kannada culture and the Kannada environs. If not, we will have to boycott these worthless films.’²⁵

Thus what linked Kannada cinema with Kannada nationalism was the Anti-Dubbing movement that strongly opposed non-Kannada films being dubbed into Kannada, a phenomenon that had started from 1955 onwards. When it grew to such proportions in the early 1960s that Kannada films had to take a backseat, the spectators too had started preferring ‘spectacular’ non-Kannada films. The spark of discontent spread soon across the Kannada region. It needs to be noted that both the anti-dubbing arguments in Karnataka and the pro-dubbing ones in Madras had the same rationale: economic survival. Karnataka Film Finance Corporation was dominated by exhibitors and did not have fair representation from different sections of the filmmaking domain. It did not take any official stance against the anti-dubbing arguments and chose to remain silent. In the absence of any official action, it was the Kannada organizations that stepped in under the leadership of Nadigera Krishna Rao. They held massive

24 The pioneer of Mahatma Pictures D. Shankar Singh was strongly influenced by Gandhi and was himself a freedom fighter. Intriguingly most of the films made by Mahatma Pictures were mythological. And what more, when Mahatma Pictures ran into heavy loss, a folk film like *Nagakannika* (1949) that featured, for the first time, a bold exposure of female body through actress Jayashri. Thus the ‘exposure turn’ was inaugurated in Kannada cinema. The next to follow was *Jaganmohini* (1951) that ‘shamelessly’ exposed the cleavage of Harini’s breasts. See Gangadhara Modaliyar, ಕನ್ನಡ ಸಿನೆಮಾ, ಇತಿಹಾಸದ ಪುಟಗಳಲ್ಲಿ (Kannada cinema in the pages of history), Bangalore: Kannada Pustaka Pradhikara, 1996, p. 69.

25 As film historians note, this may have turned the filmmakers’ attention to the novels in Kannada. See Vijaya *et al.*, ಕನ್ನಡ ಚಲನಚಿತ್ರ ಇತಿಹಾಸ, 1, p. 127.

demonstrations against screening of dubbed films, an instance that worked effectively towards blocking such film screenings.

A disastrous flood situation in 1961 brought the Kannada cine-artists settled in Madras to the forefront in the relief program organized by *Prajavani*, a daily newspaper, across the state. The screen figures appeared before people in flesh and blood, an incident that created a bonding that was hitherto unknown between them. However, the Kannada movement and the Anti-Dubbing movement that erupted later did not reach the same film personalities located in Madras. According to film historians, 'Kannada movement went on with full force, but the role of Kannada cinema people was negligible.'²⁶

Thus flood relief fund-raising, Anti-dubbing movement, and the Kannada movement that had a broader base and scope are the greatest hallmarks of the time between 1960 and 1962. The impact these phenomena had on the Kannada Cinema was significant. These tremendously strengthened the demand that the state government take necessary measures to relocate the industry from Madras in the home state itself. 1960s, after the formation of a separate linguistic state, saw major changes in Kannada cinema. From mere film production to becoming an industry, the decade saw many creative firsts and new records. With the production shifted from Madras to Karnataka during this decade, it could finally establish a certain 'Kannada-ness' in filmmaking.

As a theme, it was in devotionals and historicals that Kannada cinema of the 1960s tried to promote a subnational identity as a trope of Indian national identity. I shall however restrict myself to historicals here before which I try to delineate the theoretical links between history and narrative cinema.

History and Narrative Cinema

Relationship between history and cinema is fraught with distrust and indifference if not hostility. To substantiate this, three ideological positions may be discerned: skeptics, enthusiasts and cautionists.²⁷

The skeptics think that history in moving images sweeps the spectator off her feet by its sheer spectacularity, lack of critical initiative, entertainment motif and dramatic value. Such cinema indulges in triumphalism or may be deployed for certain ideological ends. They argue that the fictionality, narrativity and the intended spectacularity will make the very concept of 'authentic historical film' a contradiction of sorts. The visual hypnosis may thus produce a 'historical mythology' that forecloses any speculation on historical complexity.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

27 *Cineaste* brought out a supplement in 2004 entitled 'Film and History: Questions to Filmmakers and Historians'. Several documentary filmmakers, narrative filmmakers, historians and history educators had taken part in it. I have classified their responses under these three rubrics. See *Cineaste*, 29: 2, 2004, pp. 55-68.

Two, the enthusiasts argue that narrative cinema's concern is to stage 'popular history' and therefore questions related to academic history as a discourse would be irrelevant. Further, cinema being an audio-visual medium, issues related to sight and sound chip in making way for certain changes that may seem as a compromise on 'objectivity' or 'accuracy'.

The cautionist school rightly observes that 'historical truths have profound political consequences' and that 'all history writing is a political act.'²⁸ Therefore a filmmaker has to approach historical material with an ethical awareness. In other words, she should engage the discourse of history -- that is, the facts, the issues, and the arguments raised in other historical works. According to Robert Rosenstone, a historical film should at least ask the questions a historian asks even if it answers them in a dramatic and semifictional way.²⁹

As far as the dichotomy between factuality and fictionality in cinema is concerned, I would agree with Hayden White that if history is understood as 'past', the whole question of accuracy and reality surfaces. But if it is understood as 'a process of social change that includes not just the past, but the present as well', then certain 'techniques of figurations' are needed to understand the process of transformation.³⁰ Moreover, history being a selection of data out of an enormous base, more often than not, non-fiction can be more fictional than 'fiction' itself.

Therefore, it is the presentness of the past that is more useful in understanding the past. How should we then evaluate a historical film? It is not so much the minor task of locating the 'historical' inaccuracies, but the more difficult one of determining the purpose of these inaccuracies and the extent to which they have been deployed for the 'logic' of the film that should be the objective of such an evaluation.³¹

Further, the argument goes that it is the narrativity that militates against the 'objectivity' that is necessary to deal with history. We need to also be aware that even the realist-seeming documentary films narrate. Turning to Hayden White once again, to deny narrative is to deny meaning-making itself.³²

28 Barbara Abrash and Daniel J. Walkowitz, 'Sub/Versions of History: A Meditation on Film and Historical Narrative', *History Workshop*, No. 38, 1994, pp. 203-214, p. 203-4.

29 Robert A. Rosenstone, 'The Reel Joan of Arc: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of the Historical Film', *The Public Historian*, 25: 3, 2003, pp. 61-77, p. 61.

30 Hayden White, in 'Film and History: Questions to Filmmakers and Historians', *Cineaste*, 29: 2, 2004, pp. 55-68, p. 67.

31 See Luke Gibbons, 'Framing History: Neil Jordan's "Michael Collins"', *History Ireland*, 5: 1 1997, pp. 47-51, p. 49.

32 Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7: 1, On Narrative, 1980, pp. 5-27, p. 5.

Some Salient Features of Kannada Historicals

Most of the historicals in Kannada cinema were made in the 1960s, understandably as an attempt at culturally consolidating the Kannada nation after the formation of Kannada state in 1956. The first historical *Ranadheera Kanteerava* made in 1960, according to film scholar Madhava Prasad, is one through which 'the seeds of a cinema based Kannada nationalism were decisively sown. The film set the stage for Rajkumar's career to lead unerringly thereafter towards the kind of absolutist kingship over the nation of Kannada that is ascribed in the narrative to the king Ranadheera.'³³

None of them are a mere nostalgic trip into the past, but deliberately deployed towards certain ideological ends like claiming a rich cultural and vibrant political past for 'Kannada-nation'. They all focus on 'region/nation-historical individuals'; thus 'aristocratic' in their focus; and therefore do not aspire towards any semblance of social totality. Deployed to serve certain regional-nationalist functions, they end up portraying a past that is essentially static and devoid of their own dynamics of change even if being presentist in their objective. Past thus cinematically anesthetized stands as a 'once-upon-a-time' glory that can be tailored into a trophy for the sake of culturally consolidating the newly formed Kannada-nation.

None of the Kannada historicals of the 1960s and even the 70s claim complete 'historical accuracy' and thus lean towards being ideologically loaded projections of reality instead of 'reflections' of reality. They acknowledge their sources, both historical and literary provide disclaimers; make pleas to accommodate any inaccuracies (*Ranadheera Kanteerava*, [1960]; *Vijyanagarada Veeraputra* [1961]; *Kitturu Chennamma* [1962]; *Immadi Pulikeshi* [1967]; *Krishnadevaraya* [1970]), visibly in sharp contrast with the historicals made later that rely only on the literary sources (*Mayura* [1975] based on a novel by Devudu) and *Huliya Halina Mevu* [1979], based on a novel by Bharatisuta), only to end with the last historical film *Krantiveera Sangolli Rayanna* (2012) that brazenly ignores acknowledging any at all.

Kannada historical cinema goes as far as the 4th century of Mayurasharma, moves on to 7th century of Immadi Pulikeshi, (1967); cinematizes Jakanachari, the master sculptor of the 12th century (*Amarashilpi Jakanachari*, 1964); lays claim to Krishnadevaraya of 15-16th century as Kannada Ramaramana, (*Vijyanagarada Veeraputra*, 1961, *Sri Krishna Devaraya*, 1970); glorifies Kitturu Chennamma (Kitturu Chennamma, 1962) of the 19th century as the pioneer of nationalist resistance even before Jhansi Rani Lakshmbai; and Rayanna (*Sangolli Rayanna*, 1967) as yet another great freedom fighter in the same century.

Mayura (1975) being the only historical produced in the 1970's sums up the major concerns of historical films made in the 1960s. It is a highly popular film that is temporally located in the fourth century in the reign of Kadamba dynasty. The film resounds with Kannadist rhetoric even more since Kadamba was the first indigenous

33 M. Madhava Prasad, *Cine-Politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in South India*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2014, p. 111.



Figure 1: Dr Rajkumar as Prince Mayurasharma. Still from *Mayura* (1975).

dynasty to use Kannada at the administrative level. The publicity poster for the film boldly states that ‘this is the story of a famous historical character Mayura who illustrates how self-respecting, courageous, adventurous, freedom-loving and more importantly, how eminently forgiving and friendly Kannadigas are!’ The melody of the immensely popular song sung by the super-star Rajkumar ‘ನಾನಿರುವುದೆ ನಿಮಗಾಗಿ, ನಾಡಿರುವುದು ನಮಗಾಗಿ’ (I dedicate my life for the Kannada people’s welfare, this nation is meant for our welfare...) became the chanting song of Gokak Movement, a Kannada nationalist movement, later.

In sum, Kannada historicals focused mainly on the empires, kings and queens of a spatial entity called north Karnataka region. It was the glorious heritage of Vijayanagara, Chalukya, and Kitturu province that Kannada cinema claimed, the main motive of which seems to be towards popularizing a strong sense of inclusive Kannada identity.

Eloquent Gaps

Kannada historicals focused mainly on the empires, kings and queens of a spatial entity called north Karnataka region, now considered to be ‘backward’ in the integrated Karnataka. Mysore being the ‘prosperous’ region with the recent memory of Princely rule before 1947, strangely, did not see a historical cinema in honour of the Wodeyars, the Hindu rulers of Mysore Province. However, what is interesting is that the protagonists of these historicals spatially located in the North Karnataka region speak ‘Mysore Kannada’ and it is not surprising that geographically they denote a different province while culturally remind the audience of the Mysore rulers. Any ‘raja’ film was in effect a ‘mysore raja’ film!³⁴

34 In fact, *Mayura* (1975) is ‘devotionally’ dedicated to the last King of Mysore Sri Jayachamaraja Wodeyar (1940-1974) and opens with a shot in which the King is seen being garlanded. It also ‘gratefully acknowledges’ the Prince and Rajamata (King’s mother) for permitting to shoot inside the Mysore Palace. The posters for the film featured the Palace as the backdrop, a popular icon in Karnataka for the Mysore Royalty.

The 18th century is conspicuously absent in Kannada cinema and Tipu Sultan who fought four wars against the British stands willfully ignored. There has not been a full-length film except ‘a demonised guest appearance’ in *Kitturu Chennamma* (1962) that celebrates her as the pioneer of anticolonial resistance, coming, as she does, before Jhansi Rani Lakshmbai. If Kannada cinema, through its *Kitturu Chennamma* intends to claim that the Kannada region was the first to take on the British in war, why does it not deploy Tipu Sultan who was acknowledged to be a very powerful ruler by his contemporaries and a military commander of great distinction who fought more than one war against the British thus becoming the most hated enemy of the British East India Company?

The plausible explanations for such a gap needs to be discerned one, how Tipu features in the colonial representations, and two, how ‘Tipu’ and ‘Muslim’ have been cinematically ‘other’ed in Kannada cinema.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the historical memory of Tipu Sultan as a tyrant and the Mysore Wars as ‘just wars’ that British were compelled to fight had become staple. Hundred years later, studies may have been taken up by the South Asian historians to rediscover Tipu and his times, but Tipu seems by and large written out of historical memory of Kannada people for one finds few attempts here and there to rediscover the valiant nationalist consciousness in Tipu or resuscitate his true legacy. But the fact remains that representations of Tipu in historical accounts, art, and cinema, in India in general and Kannada in particular, by and large are heavily influenced by the colonial representations. And those representations as a British response were marked with a deep sense of ambiguity. Tipu fought three separate wars against the British and came to be demonized as a cruel and tyrannical despot and a Muslim bigot who forced religious conversion on his subjects and tortured British soldiers in his dungeons. It was the negative legend of Tipu that has not only ‘testified to the impact that empire and imperial themes exhibited on British popular culture of the era,’³⁵ but also has been successful at invisibilising the alternate representations of Tipu.³⁶

35 Michael Soracoe, ‘Tyrant! Tipu Sultan and the Reconceptation of British Imperial Identity, 1780-1800’, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, 2013, p. 1.

36 In the mid-20th century representations however, the literary and the televisual representations seem to present Tipu in a more nuanced way. While a teleserial like *Sword of Tipu Sultan* (1989) that focused on Tipu’s unrelenting efforts at containing the increasingly aggressive invasion of the Southern territory by the British was reeling under litigation, it was Girish Karnad who ‘voiced a strong support (for it) on the grounds that Tipu needed to be given his due as a major figure in Karnataka history, a visionary, and a patriot.’ Girish Karnad, in his play *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1996), commissioned by BBC Radio to commemorate 50 years of Independence, casts Tipu in richly and oppositionally-layered roles that he almost appears as a palimpsest – ‘as a beloved ruler, legendary warrior, loving father, and visionary dreamer, but also as the Machiavellian schemer who plots with the French against English, the defeated soldier who enters into humiliating treaties with the enemy, and the gullible commander who is eventually betrayed by his own side.’ See *Girish Karnad, Collected Plays*, vol. 2, New Delhi: OUP, 2005, xxiii.

In Kannada, even if late, there have been a reasonable number of literary and post-colonial representations of Tipu that have successfully pitched up the lost-in-the- colonial maze-Tipu.

Secondly, Kannada cinema as a discourse has variously ‘othered’ Muslim as a community and Tipu as a Muslim ruler, few exceptions notwithstanding. I submit that not just the cinematic representations by themselves, but the gaps, omissions, and silences at best and demonisation at worst have all made Kannada cinema in general, and historicals in particular, foster simultaneously a regional as well as a Hindu communal consciousness. Two examples in the historicals may be cited here. The film Sri Krishnadevaraya (1970) abounds in references as much to Kannada – aimed at claiming a Kannada descent for the emperor as to ‘hindu’ through ‘ಹಿಂದೂ ಧರ್ಮ ಸಾಮ್ರಾಜ್ಯ’ (Hindu Religious Empire), ‘ಹಿಂದೂ ಶೀಲವಂತ ನಾರಿ’ (Chaste Hindu Woman), ‘ಹಿಂದೂ ಸಾಮ್ರಾಜ್ಯ ನಕ್ಷೆ’ (Sketch of Hindu Empire), ‘ಹಿಂದೂ ಸಾಮ್ರಾಜ್ಯದ ಹೃದಯವಾದ ವಿಜಯನಗರ’ (Vijayanagara – the heart of Hindu Empire) and so on. The second example is *Kitturu Chennamma* that I will take up in the next section for an analysis of nation-gender discourses in the Kannada historicals.

***Kitturu Chennamma* (Chennamma, The Queen of Kitturu, 1962)**

Kitturu Chennamma draws heavily from several sources including a radio play by A. N. Krishnarao with the same title in 1951.³⁷ It acknowledges in the beginning that along with the available historical sources related to Rani Chennamma, they have ‘artistically incorporated’ some fictitious anecdotes that go with the ‘spirit of those times’. The title of the film *Kitturu Chennamma* appears with cannon-firing shots to introduce the queen-warrior to the audience. A school prayer forms the background to the credits on the screen thus preparing the audience for a classroom shot. Since the film is intended towards making a ‘historical correction’, it is only apt that a pedagogical scene is provided as the cinematic locale. The scene begins as follows:

Teacher: Who worked hard to bring us the freedom?

Students: Gaandheeejee!

Teacher: Who was the very first warrior-woman who confronted the British Empire with the conviction that ‘freedom is paradise’?

Students: Jhansi Rani Lakshmbibai!

Teacher: No, no. There is one courageous woman from Karnataka who gave up her life for the sake of freedom even before Jhansi Rani Lakshmbibai.

36 (cfd) But even here, on more than one count for a controversial figure like Tipu who had a very uneasy political equation with the British is characterized in radically opposite ways. See H.S. Shivaprakash, ಸುಲ್ತಾನ್ ಟಿಪ್ಪೂ (Sultan Tippoo, a play, 1989), in ನಾಟಕಗಳು ಇಂದಿನವರೆಗೆ 1985-2000 (Plays Until Now), Bengaluru: Kannada Pustaka Pradhikara, 2011, pp. 193-254; Ma. Na. Murthy, ಟಿಪ್ಪು ಸುಲ್ತಾನ್ (Tippu Sultan, novel), Part 1, 2, and 3, Bangalore: Kamadhenu, 1964, to name a few.

37 A.N. Krishna Rao, ಐತಿಹಾಸಿಕ ನಾಟಕಗಳು (Historical Plays), Bangalore: Sagar, 2013.

A student gets up.

Who is it Sir? We have never heard of any such instance? Please tell us who she is Sir!

Teacher: I will. Listen to me carefully. She is Kitturu Rani Chennamma. As early as 33 years before Jhansi Rani Lakshmbai, the brave call for national freedom emerged from the district of Belgaum in North Karnataka in 1824...

Mallasarja, Chennamma's husband ruled Kittur state from 1782 to 1816. In Sadashiva Wodeyar's historical account, that was 'a glorious period from all accounts found in history, ballads and songs composed in his honour. ... He was the most famous and well-known of the Kittur chiefs.'³⁸

The narrative opens with Mallasarja confronting Tipu, a much bigger King of the times when he is taken as a prisoner by Tipu. The confrontation between Tipu and Mallasarja (played by Kannada superstar Rajkumar) is full of Kannadist and Kitturist rhetoric delivered with a flourish by the latter during which Tipu is not just addressed in singular, but successfully 'othered' as a brutal Muslim ruler. Mallasarja's refusal to pay 'kappa' elicits an exclamation from Tipu as the 'great love for Kannada'. Mallasarja's 'tongue-in-cheek' responses are read as 'great love for 'freedom.' And finally the chief even denounces Tipu with, 'will a crow become a swan just because it takes a dip in the sacred river Ganga?' At the end, Mallasarja is pushed to prison because of his 'Kannadist-Kitturist' defiance.

Then comes Chennamma (played by Saroja Devi)! She is Mallasarja's second wife. Brave and strong that she is, Chennamma is also 'cultured' and 'home-loving'. She is 'an ace at sword-fighting, goes on rounds in disguise and cracks political conspiracies, she efficiently plays the political chess-game' and what more, even her musical skills are excellent. With a 'sword in hand, she is Chandi incarnate, yet a Saraswati while playing on veena' and of course, she can switch-roles in a flash. And she is a mother too, only of a different sort, for she teaches sword-fighting to the son of Rudramma, the first wife and does not hesitate to send her own boy-son to the battle and 'sacrifice' him.

References to Kannada abound throughout the cinema. It is not merely the territorial interest that guides the concerns of Mallasarja and Chennamma but Kannadist aspirations as well. Moments before his death, Mallasarja laments; 'I am the sovereign ruler of Kitturu. All that I long for is to see Kannadamma, fill my eyes, rest my head in her lap and sleep peacefully.'

John Thackeray, the British Collector of Dharwad and the agent for East India Company is taken aback at the defiant words of Chennamma who is now without the support of her husband or son asks: 'Such a temerity even in the face of such adversity?' Chennamma answers: 'Such is the nature of Kannadigas by birth!' She sums up the 'Kannada-nature-by-birth' as 'We do not throw the bread crumbs to the dogs outside only to barge in and cut the throats of the innocent people inside!.' She instructs the

38 Sadashiva S. Wodeyar, *Rani Chennamma*, Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997, p. 6 and 12.

messenger who is carrying the war-message to the British as: ‘Tell them that the clarion call to freedom is resounding not just from Kitturu, *but all parts of India*. (emphasis mine). She tells her soldiers, ‘This war is to avenge the atrocity committed on your mother; this is the epic war that will show to the whole country what great freedom-lovers Kannadigas are!’ She reminds the women that ‘Kannada valiant women are *Adishakti* incarnate’ and coaxes them into fighting along with their soldier-husbands.

Earlier Mallasarja’s confrontation with Tipu and later Chennamma’s with John Thackeray cinematically establish the political unconscious of the film. Tipu and Thackeray are lumped together as ‘foreigner’, ‘enemy’ and hence the ‘other’ of Mallasarja and Chennamma who are the regional-national icons of Kannada and Karnataka.

Delineating the axis of difference between Lakshmibai and Chennamma, a much detailed scene in Kitturu may be mentioned here. A controversy that plagues the depiction of Jhansi Rani Lakshmibai in the colonial writings was whether she had been responsible for the massacre of about sixty English men, women and children who had taken shelter in one of the forts at Jhansi. These were killed after being promised safety and the incident came to be identified as an act of utmost cruelty.

In sharp contrast, Chennamma is all gentleness and kindness. She assures her women and children prisoners who are dancing leisurely and merrily with, ‘God has given kindness to all the living beings. In his eyes, no one is a prisoner. I love these children more than my own. When I hug these innocent children, I am reminded of my own son who died a while ago. Politically, you all are prisoners, but you are, always, our dearest prisoners.’ And when the time of release arrives, the children refuse to leave her and even call her ‘mummy.’ She releases all of them to show that Kitturu does not need hostages to protect itself. She releases all of them to show that Kitturu does not need hostages to protect itself. But in Naikar’s *Queen of Kitturu*, she tells Elliott and Stevenson -- the two prominent prisoners -- to seek a peaceful end to the conflict with the British. She tells them that the prisoners would be released if they accept the recently adopted son as the new king.³⁹

When all is lost and Chennamma dies spending five years in prison. And we return to the classroom scene in which she and Kittur people are categorically declared as the ‘forerunners of such uprisings in future all over the country’. Chennamma is paid a tribute with ‘she has, therefore, been rightly called “The Morning Star of India’s Freedom Struggle.”’ We see the children in the classroom are sitting dumbstruck at this tale of martyrdom but proud to be a part of such cultural and political lineage. The teacher says in a heavy tone: ‘The sapling of Independence that Kitturu Chennamma planted and tended to has now grown to be a huge tree yielding the fruit of Freedom to all the children of India. May the soul of that great woman rest in peace’.

39 Basavaraj Naikar, *The Queen of Kittur*, Delhi: Authorpress, 2009.

In the process of writing biography, the lack of documentary evidence⁴⁰ may often contribute to the evolution of a legend. What we see in the textual and visual representations of Chennamma is a linear narrative of political resistance that pitches her and the British on a mutually irreconcilable plane. Weren't there any moments of vulnerability or reconciliation? There may surely have been. One such instance mentioned in Wodeyar's account is:

Before fighting a war with the British Agent Thackeray, Chennamma and Veeramma (Mallasarja and Rudramma's son Shivalingarudrasarja's wife) had written a letter dated 11th of October 1824 to William Chaplin, the Commissioner of Deccan stationed at Pune. A letter that sounds desperate. 'We have endured everything patiently, but to you, we look for ordering the continuation of the whole Samsthan. ... Except yourself, we have none to assist us. Feeling confidence in you, we have endured patiently all that has been done to us...' ⁴¹

The depiction of Chennamma in visual and textual representations, folklore included,⁴² smooths out all the contradictions and pitches her on a diametrically opposite plane with the British, lest the heroic glamour loses its lustre, particularly because cinematic resolution of heroism does not favour interruptions, speculations, doubts and distress.

Queen is Just a Woman!

The main women characters of Kannada cinema from 1930s through the 1960s, whether mythological, historical or social, are fashioned after the 'desirable' woman of the reform and nationalist movement. As Tharu and Lalita observe, 'The newly homogenized Indian "tradition", indeed the new Hinduism, took on an unprecedented upper-caste color.'⁴³ The 'woman' was designated as its emblem. She was expected to be an embodiment of 'sexual decorum and restraint'; she paid 'careful attention to rearing children to be proper citizens', she would be a 'companion to her husband, a person he might turn to when he needed to unburden himself, one who would share his troubles and his joys.'⁴⁴ In other words, she was the one who would have all the

40 According to A.N.Krishna Rao, the 'Kitturu Rani Historical Association' of Kitturu has collected available material on the queen and brought out four books. However, important letters and documents related to the queen are stored in British Museum. Until accessing them, it would be hard to write a reasonably comprehensive biography of Kitturu Chennamma. See his *A.N. Krishna Rao's Historical Plays* (Kannada), p. 359.

41 Wodeyar, *Rani Chennamma*, 55-58.

42 See M.S. Sunkapur, ed., *Janapada Sahitya Darshana* (Folk Literature), Part II, Dharwar: Karnatak University, 1976.

43 Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India*, Vol. 1. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995: p 161-2.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 165.



Figure 2: Dr Rajkumar opposite B. Saroja Devi in *Kitturu Chennamma* (1961).

qualities necessary for a man to fall in love with her. Chennamma too is cinematically fashioned in terms of ‘queen! yet a woman!’

The written and folkloric historical accounts state that Mallasarja fell in love with Chennamma when he met her father, a chieftain of a smaller province Kakati. He seeks her hand in marriage without concealing that he is already married. To quote from a written history, ‘Soon thereafter the marriage was solemnized at Kakati and when Mallasarja returned to Kittur he had with him by his side, his brave, clever, and lovely second-wife Chennamma.’⁴⁵

Yet, in the film, it is Chennamma who wishes to marry Mallasarja and not otherwise. A letter follows soon after Mallasarja reaches Kittur from Chennamma’s father that ‘his daughter has vowed to marry only Mallasarja, and if not, she would prefer to stay single serving the Kittur palace all her life’. In a stroke of cinematic resolution, the intriguing issue is settled by the magnanimity of the first wife Rudramma agreeing to the proposal with, ‘Only a woman who has gone through much hardship can understand the depth of another woman’s desire.’ The queenly consent is followed by the royal family Gurus blessing the marriage. A historically polygamous king stands sanitized in order to fit the ‘pure and perfect’ image of a superstar of the 20th century!

Being the only daughter of another Chief, if only lesser, didn’t the courageous Chennamma ever think of taking over from her father? Such a question however seems easily resolved by the ‘naturalized’ gender-norms, if only universal, because they seem to hold good across a time span from the early 19th century when Chennamma lived to latter part of the 20th century when the film was produced. Marriage is the goal of

45 Sadashiva S. Wodeyar, *Rani Chennamma*, Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997, p. 29.

a woman's life. Even the folksongs are enlisted in order to give these gender-lessons not just to Chennamma but to the audience as well. When Chennamma has to leave for her husband's house, a whole band of 'sad-looking' and 'tradition-endorsing' women (including her dead mother in the portrait) sings in chorus implying that a queen is 'just' a woman.

Further, women, as a rule, do not speak anything about this linguistic nationalism. Even Chennamma does not, except when she has to teach sword-fighting to the royal heir ('I shall make him the brave warrior of Kannada') or after she is compelled to sit in the throne. It is the prerogative of Mallasarja/Rajkumar to refer to 'kannada nationalism' until his death. As Prasad notes, 'The linguistic representativeness was a feature of the male actor's persona in a way it never was for the female actor.'⁴⁶

How autonomous is a 'woman hero', historical notwithstanding?

Edwards sums it up as 'The hero is a self; the heroine an appendage.'⁴⁷ Chennamma of the film surely grows to be more than an 'appendage,' but she nevertheless seems like one compelled to share the 'heroic burden' of Mallasarja. While the narrative prominence centers upon the queen, the symbolic centrality rests with the male protagonist as Rajkumar was becoming very important to the Kannada national identity throughout the 1960s. The film in a way illustrates that 'the king, even in his absence is the organising locus of the narrative.'⁴⁸ And the queen is merely his widow trying to continue his legacy! Further, while Rajkumar acted exclusively in Kannada films, the major female stars including Saroja Devi, acted also in Tamil and Telugu cinema. According to Prasad, '[M]ale stars were to commit themselves to exclusive linguistic representation, and thereby to the elaboration of a national identity, while female stars functioned as exchangeable objects.'⁴⁹

Thus, the rhetoric of Kannada nationalism through a female star who was not an icon of linguistic nationalism gets sidelined vis-à-vis a figure like Rajkumar whose role in the narrative is comparatively limited. As a daughter, wife, mother, and a widow, even a queen's actions guided by the meta-text of womanhood and even fighting a deadly battle comes to be seen as fulfilling a promise she had made to her husband. As far as gender stereotypes are concerned, Kannada cinema has, by and large, until the 'auteur' cinema that emerged in the late 1960s, functioned as a 'cinematic conduct-book' for women and even a 'woman-centered' historical film like KC leaves the gender stereotypes unaltered – worse – reinforced.

46 See Prasad's 'Rajkumar, the Uncrowned King' in *Cine-politics*, p. 106.

47 Lee R. Edward, 'The Labors of Psyche: Toward a Theory of Female Heroism', *Critical Inquiry*, 6:1, 1979, pp. 33-49, p. 36.

48 Prasad, *Cine-Politics*, p. 97.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

Biographical Note

Sukanya Kanarally, currently a Visiting Fellow at New Zealand India Research Institute at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand has a doctoral degree in Historical Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She worked as an Associate Professor at Bangalore University, India for a couple of decades. As a published writer and translator, Kanarally's recent book has been a collection of short stories by Vaidehi translated from Kannada into English and published by Central Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, India. Kanarally's interests include Gender Studies and Media Studies.