A Non-Take on Kannada Cinema

Chandan Gowda

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

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

A dominant tendency within film studies has been to track the effects of social power and ideology in cinematic texts. Here, the emphasis is less on the aesthetic properties of cinematic images and sound and more on their institutional coordinates in social space. Bipolar Identity, too, intends to explain Kannada films as texts reflective of and engaging with local socio-political realities of their time. More specifically, its author, M.K. Raghavendra, notes: "This is an inquiry into how local/regional identity is addressed in regional language cinema and also whether regional identity can conflict with the national identity/other identities" (p. xii). A few pages later, he says: ... the purpose of the book is to chart out the way Kannada cinema responds to both the region and the nation, or, to phrase it differently, how it negotiates the space between the two" (p. xvi).

Raghavendra's phrase, 'Kannada art cinema' relevant for his discussion since it was closer (especially after the late 1970s) to the 'pan-Indian art film' promoted by the National Film Development Corporation, and free from the compulsions of addressing a geographically circumscribed audience, and had 'little local appeal' (p. xii).

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

The sociological factors Raghavendra holds relevant for understanding Kannada film conventions are not convincing. Artefacts endogamy obtained in most parts of India and was not unique to M yorse. Further, by examining caste through the enumerative logic of census in cinema, he misses out on the powerful work of caste in the aesthetics of representation. He thin understanding of caste allows him to conclude, incorrectly, that caste hierarchy was not unique to M yorse. Further, by examining caste through the enumerative logic of census in cinema, he misses out on the powerful work of caste in the aesthetics of representation. Regarding the stricter embrace of dharma in Kannada films, I wish that the book also explained how that became manifest in 'a non-Brahmin Kannada cinema'.

Raghavendra's attempts to read Kannada films as an index of ongoing socio-political events stay tenuous. A sample illustration should suffice. After noting that women's dignity was not always secure in films in the 1990s, he explains: ... the demeaning of women in the Kannada films in the 1990s was caused by a lowering of the self-image of the Kannadiga, which also reflects in the lowering of the language. The lowering of the self-image may have been the result of local politics in which politicians openly disgraced themselves without being made accountable to the constituents of the region, who remained helpless. This perhaps led to public cynicism over whether the political choices that the public was
A dominant tendency within film studies has been to track the effects of social power and ideology in cinematic texts. Here, the emphasis is less on the aesthetic properties of cinematic images and sound and more on their institutional coordinates in social space. Bipolar Identity, too, intends to explain Kannada films as texts reflective of and engaging with local socio-political realities of their time.

How and why popular disgust with state corruption translates into popular self-loathing, which should qualify the book’s view that lore (and Karnataka) as a Kannada space, affirmation of faith in state-sanctioned law. Narratives of virtuous young men’s violent against the evil-doers. In other words, the arrested after enjoying a free hand at violence youth heroes (or anti-heroes) of these films are extremely violent films. Most of the violent things that are not legally and ethically correct’ (p. 33). The very many grammatical and typographical errors in the book show the publisher’s editorial indifference. Yet again: ‘Any heroines today are from Punjab, Gujarat, or Bengal, as though the constituents of the region have an indeterminate identity’ (p. 158; emphasis mine).

An important claim in Bipolar Identity pertains to how the single-party rule by the Congress in Mysore and the absence of a strong anti-brahman movement (like the one seen in Tamil Nadu), which did not polarize any other political constituency, help explain the ironic distinctiveness of Dr. Rajkumar, the superstar of Kannada cinema. Noting that the superstar became the ‘voice of conscience’ in the late 1960s, Raghavendra writes: ‘... his adversaries are not identifiable as traders, landowners, the upper castes, or servants of the state, etc. (which are all political categories) but simply as “bad people”, who do things that are not legally and ethically correct’ (p. 38). This line of reasoning, which could found a valuable argument, remains, however, under-elaborated. Bipolar Identity is silent on how the issue of Kannada identity was managed in film music. Kannada music directors have smugly in sounds from Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and Hollywood films and brought newness to the local soundscape without overwhelming the cultural identity. An engagement with Kannada cinematic texts reflective of and engaging with local socio-political realities of their time.

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

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

... and why the nation... deserves more loyalty’ (p. 17). It is difficult to imagine how Krishnadevaraya, a major Kannada icon, could represent the ‘Indian nation’ and his vassal the Mysore state. Another illustrative excerpt:

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

Just how did the nation take the place of god? We will never know from this book. Most conclusions in Bipolar Identity are not self-assured: ‘Early Kannada cinema... appears to have no place for a brahmin character, although there are caste indicators and the protagonist’s family can be identified as Veerashaivas. In Vasanthasena (1941) to this list (p. xxi). For him, these films also explain why early Kannada cinema was a ‘non-brahmin cinema’.

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

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

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