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Language And Humiliation In P. Lankesh's Sankranthi

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Introduction

P. Lankesh's Sankranthi is a bold and unflinching drama that unpacks the entrenched caste divisions in rural Karnataka. Set against the backdrop of a celebratory harvest festival, the play juxtaposes festivity with the stark reality of systemic social oppression. One of the most compelling instruments Lankesh uses to highlight caste discrimination is language — not merely as a means of communication but as a mechanism of power, hierarchy, and humiliation. In Sankranthi, language functions as a vehicle of dominance, and through it, Lankesh exposes the caste system's psychological violence.

The Power of Language in a Casteist Society

Language has always held symbolic and practical power. In Sankranthi, it becomes an ideological tool used to uphold and reproduce caste hierarchies. The upper-caste characters employ language to assert control, issuing orders, mocking, and often speaking in ways that reflect inherent assumptions about caste-based superiority.

Lankesh presents dialogues that carry layers of social meaning — the tone, vocabulary, and sentence structure differ based on who is speaking and to whom. This linguistic stratification mimics real societal structures, where speaking “out of turn” or using the “wrong” register of language could invite social punishment for the lower castes.

Derogatory Language as a Weapon

One of the key strategies employed by the dominant castes in Sankranthi is the use of derogatory caste-based slurs and dehumanizing terms. These words are often delivered casually, almost as if they are part of daily conversation. This normalizes the abuse and reinforces the idea that lower-caste individuals do not deserve dignity.

Such language is not limited to direct insults; often, humiliation is embedded in euphemisms, jokes, and metaphors. For instance, when a lower-caste character expresses a desire for equal treatment, the upper-caste character might respond with mockery, likening them to animals or unclean beings. This metaphorical language serves to erase individual identity and reduce the lower castes to their perceived “place” in the social hierarchy.

Condescension and Aggression in Dialogue

Even when direct insults are not used, Sankranthi illustrates how tone and delivery play crucial roles in caste-based oppression. Lower-caste individuals are spoken to, not spoken with — reflecting a deeply entrenched asymmetry in social power.

For example, requests from Dalit characters are met with commands or dismissals. Questions are met with suspicion or irritation. This reflects how even linguistic politeness is reserved for those within the upper caste circle, while others are denied basic conversational respect. The aggressive posture in dialogue reflects not just personal prejudice but a cultural license to degrade and dominate.

Language as a Mirror of Internalized Oppression

In a particularly tragic dimension, some lower-caste characters in Sankranthi begin to adopt self-deprecating language themselves. They speak of their own inferiority not as a belief but as a survival strategy. This form of internalized oppression shows how language doesn't just oppress from the outside — it colonizes the minds of the oppressed.

When a character says something like, “People like us don’t belong there,” the implication is not just social but deeply psychological. Lankesh uses such moments to illustrate how centuries of verbal degradation can produce a resigned identity — one that no longer even seeks equality for fear of punishment or ridicule.

Audience Discomfort as a Dramatic Technique

Lankesh does not aim to comfort his audience. He makes them uncomfortable on purpose. By having upper-caste characters utter humiliating words on stage — often in the presence of those being humiliated — the viewer is placed in a moral dilemma. Should they laugh? Remain silent? Speak out?

This discomfort is central to Lankesh’s message. He is forcing the audience to confront not only what is said on stage, but what they may have heard or said in real life. The use of real, unfiltered casteist language in a dramatic setting makes it impossible to ignore. In doing so, Lankesh breaks the fourth wall emotionally, holding up a mirror to society’s linguistic cruelty.

Contrast with Moments of Dignity and Resistance

Though language is largely used as a tool of subjugation, Lankesh does not rob his lower-caste characters of agency. Some characters speak back — reclaiming language as a form of resistance. They question, argue, and even mock the absurdity of caste justifications.

These moments of linguistic defiance are powerful. They represent the beginning of psychological liberation, even when full social liberation seems distant. The very act of speaking up becomes revolutionary in a context where silence is expected.

Sociolinguistic Context: Kannada and Caste

It’s important to understand that Lankesh’s work is grounded in the Kannada linguistic tradition, where caste is often deeply coded into honorifics, addressal terms, and speech patterns. Words like “ayya,” “sir,” or “swami” denote power, while lower-caste characters may be denied even the dignity of being called by name.

In this way, the structure of language mirrors the structure of caste. Lankesh, writing in Kannada, uses the natural rhythms and patterns of rural speech to highlight how caste discrimination permeates even informal, interpersonal language.

Implications Beyond the Play

The critique of caste-based language in Sankranthi extends beyond the boundaries of theatre. Lankesh is drawing attention to a national phenomenon — where caste-based insults remain common, even in urban spaces and among educated populations. Despite laws against caste discrimination, the verbal abuse associated with caste continues to flourish in homes, workplaces, and schools.

The play thus becomes a call to linguistic accountability. By dramatizing the violence of caste-based language, Lankesh asks the audience: How do you speak about others? What assumptions are hidden in your words?

Conclusion

In Sankranthi, P. Lankesh elevates language from a mere tool of communication to a powerful weapon of social commentary. He shows how language enforces caste hierarchies, sustains humiliation, and shapes self-perception. Through sharp, unrelenting dialogues and scenes of everyday verbal violence, Lankesh pushes audiences to reckon with the role of language in perpetuating inequality.

More than anything, Sankranthi reminds us that the fight for equality begins with words — with how we speak, who we listen to, and what we choose to remain silent about. As long as casteist language exists, the caste system will find ways to endure. But when those who are silenced begin to speak — and when others begin to listen — the script of oppression begins to change.

References

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2. Wikipedia

