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Amalgamation of Folklore and Cinema with Special Reference to *Kantara: A Legend, Chapter 1 (2025)*

Dr. Abhisek Bhakat, Assistant Professor (Senior Scale), Department of English
Daudnagar College, Daudnagar, Aurangabad, Bihar, M- 7415444860

ABSTRACT

Folklore is an integral part of richly diversified cultural heritage of India as it incorporates origin and evolution of ritualistic practices, social customs, traditional beliefs, folk music, folk dance and folk art forms. The combined effect of globalization, unprecedented technological advancement and comfort-seeking passive lifestyle, often manifests itself in present generation's lack of exposure to Indian folklore. This alarmingly fainting focus on traditional Indian folklore can be redeemed through the medium of cinematic representation. Cinema not only possesses the power to resurrect thousands of almost forgotten folklores but also to preserve it for the future generations. The easy accessibility to the world of folklore through the movies might well prove to be the fillip needed to restore enthusiasm in this field. The invigorating legend of Kantara, set in the Tulu Nadu coastal Karnataka, has borne the regional folklore concerning Daivas Panjurli and Guliga for more than 5000 years. The present paper is a venture to weigh and assess the assimilation of age old legend of Kantara in the main narrative of the motion picture *Kantara: A Legend, Chapter 1 (2025)* directed by Rishab Shetty with prime focus on determining how it has piqued the interest of the Gen Z through cinematic experience. Attempt will be made to point out the inaccuracies and unauthentic liberties if there are any in such cinematic portrayal.

Key Words: Folklore, Cinema, Legend, Myth, Rituals, Bhoota Kola Dance and Daivas

DISCUSSION

"As a folklorist, I have come to believe that no piece of folklore continues to be transmitted unless it means something - even if neither the speaker nor the audience can articulate what that meaning might be." - Alan Dundes

The fact that 'Folklore' can refer to the materials for study as well as to the specific discipline can be quite confusing. The process of defining the term 'Folklore' has been varied in different ethno-cultural communities chiefly because of the ideological impetus. In Latin American countries folklore indicates at the uncouth cultural heritage of the farmer folk. In the U.S.A it stands for the music, dance, art, tales and songs descending from the distant past. Amidst the heterogeneous definitions of folklore, the common factor invariably lies in its ancestral heritage of antiquity. Folklore as the independent branch of academic interest has blossomed in the previous century but the folklore materials have been in existence since the very beginning of the human civilization. The rich treasure trove of folklore materials

has always coexisted as subordinated to the classical art forms. Indigenous folk literature in the form of oral songs, ballads, rhymes and tales has borne the cultural ethos for thousands of years.

In the field of folklore the Grimm brothers, Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859), made serious studies of the German folklore in order to determine the philological origin of German language. As is the case often with the folklore, their choice of the German folklore as the subject of study for philological purpose is inspired by the zeal of nationalism. The seminal texts in this field like *Deutsche Mythologie* and *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* are deeply entrenched in the romantic feeling of nationalism, inspired chiefly by German scholar Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) in the Grimm Brothers. Historically, the coining of the term ‘folklore’ is unanimously ascribed to British scholar of antiquity William John Thoms who came up with the term in 1846. The first usage of the term is recorded in a letter he wrote under the pseudonym Ambrose Merton to the journal *The Athenaeum*. Within the expansive scope of folklore the entrenched features which can be assuredly traced are- its connection with large group of people, its involvement in nationalistic sentiments, its link with the lowers strata of the civilization, its tie up with ancient world and old fashioned cultural expressions, its relevance to a community connected by one common factor.

Folklore materials are traditional by nature on the other hand cinema is invention of the modern era. At present times people are becoming more and more removed from the folk culture which is primarily caused by the burgeoning number of nuclear families. Members of the younger generations get exposed to the movies, internet and tech gadgets before they come to know about the charm of shared folkloric cultural values. This remark aptly emphasizes on the influence of cinema on younger generation- “Cinema plays a significant role in shaping the lifestyle and behaviour patterns of the youth, leading to various social and moral implications” (Pundir 91). In one hand artificial passive way of life widens the gulf between psychological competence and knowledge of folklore. But on the other hand the solution also lies in the potent form of cinema which can provide with the audio-visual representation of folk art forms and rituals. Cinema as the art form is the first one to be industrialized and commercialized to the degree of magic realm touching upon all other art forms- music, drama, dance, painting, sculpture, storytelling, make up, fashion, costumes, architecture and many more. Just like folklore, Cinema is also considered to be part of the popular culture appealing mass attention and involvement. Its effect in shaping up the 20th century popular culture is undeniable as almost every one with rare exceptions, feels irresistibly drawn towards the charm of cinematic world. This comment reinforces the fact- “The mass media like cinema is not only a vehicle of enjoyment but also has become the key force in giving great emphasis to exploring indigenous elements and patronizing them too” (Barmahalia 953). Louise Lumiere and Auguste Lumiere are credited with the filming of the first motion pictures with their invention ‘Cinematographe’. With the premiere of *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory*, one of the first ‘actuality movies’ on 28th December 1895, in Paris, the Lumiere brothers launched the journey of exponentially growing cinema industry.

Folklore and cinema both being part of the popular culture of Indian civilization, especially becoming co-extensive since the beginning of 20th century, their intersection is not only expected but also inevitable. This statement certainly asserts the fusion of divine entities and commonplace matters in folklores- “Indian myths infuse these stories with a cosmological perspective, relating everyday occurrences to the sacred order (M.S. 690)”. Indian film industry has churned out many movies which coalesce folkloric elements, mythological parallel and folk songs coming out of richly varied folk cultural backgrounds. Recent examples of movies which have made extensive use of folk narratives are *Bramayugam* (2024) directed by Rahul Sadasivan, *Kumari* (2022) directed by Nirmal Sahadev, *Kantara* (2022) directed by Rishab Shetty, *Bulbbul* (2020) directed by Anvita Dutt Guptan, *Tumbbad* (2018) directed by Rahi Anil Barve among many others. *Kantara: A Legend, Chapter 1* (2025) carries forward this fascinating trend of fusing folklore and cinematic medium, offering an enchanting scope for scholarly analysis. In the introduction to the book *Folklore/Cinema* the convergence of popular cinema and folklore has been celebrated as a promising niche for academic interest (Sherman 1).

“Most of the folktales are set in imaginary places that do not exist on the world map and are described in vague terms or generally considered unimportant. They are make-believe places created only for the story” (Gupta 1045). The place Kantara is fictional but it represents the Tulunadu culture of Daiva worshipping. The movie *Kantara: A Legend, Chapter 1* (2025), written and directed by Rishab Shetty was released on 1st October 2025 on the festive occasion of Dassehra. As evident from its title, the plot revolves around the folkloric legend of the sacred well of strength situated in the quaint and mysterious land of Kantara. The Kannada word ‘Kantara’ literally means the land of dense forest. Told through the technique of frame of narrative, the sacred well holds within many legendary tales. One such tale is related in this motion picture which exhibits the dynamic and often conflicted interrelations of three ancient clans- ‘Kantara’, ‘Bangra’ and ‘Kadava’ named according to their residential land. Their different approach to life is marked prominently- people of Kantara have utmost faith in the ‘daivas’, people of Kadapa rely on unscrupulous use of black magic and the rulers of Bangra thrive on ruthlessly exploitative strategies. In the central conflict between ‘dharma’ and ‘adharma’, Kantara becomes the place of nurturing ‘dharma’ where as Bangra and Kadapa endorse ‘adharma’ to gratify their endless lust for power and wealth. The rich narrative presents this constant tussle through the dramatic ups and downs of these clans which runs for generations. This story is rooted in the densely forested region which is one of the prominent features of folklore. “Folklores are interconnected with its geographical backgrounds” (Preethi 91).

The story is replete with mysterious and enigmatic characters including the protagonist Berme. Another such character is Mayakara, the mystifying blend of human traits and divine abilities. Mayakara, explains the back story of the sacred well and Eshwara’s Garden of Bloom to young Berme who feels irresistibly curious about ‘Ganas’ and ‘Daivas’ (*Kantara: A Legend* 00:10:42). Goddess Parvati lovingly created the Garden of Bloom in the pristinely natural set up of Kantara for Lord Shiva’s uninterrupted deep meditations. Many divine spirits in the form of Gana or Daiva were sent to this place for the preservation of the sanctity of the seat of divinity- Huli, Panjurli and Guliga being prominent among many others. People of Kantara started worshipping these divine spirits in the form of holy stones and established them in the heart of their unwavering faith being aware of their sacred presence. Even though primitive, the people of Kantara have the peacefully eco friendly existence due to their spotless ethics and unflagging belief in preserving wings of Daivas.

On the other hand bloodline of kings of Bangra- Vijayendra, Rajashekhara and Kulashekhara tread the opposite path fuelled by the vices of lust, deception and cruelty. King Vijayendra started defiling the peaceful sanctity of serene ambience of Kantara with the greed of capturing ‘Eshwara’s’ Garden of Bloom. Being tricked by the mysterious Mayakara, King Vijayendra and his army becomes victim of fierce spirit Guliga’s wrath against the wrongdoers (*Kantara: A Legend* 00:07:43).. The only survivor of this onslaught, Rajashekhara, the son of Vijayendra is revived and brought back to Bangra by the evil clan of Kadapa. In his reign Rajashekhara ensured no further venture in to the sacred forest of Kantara as the border between the two regions is believed to be protected by vigilance of dreadful ‘Brahmarakshasa’. During this period of mutually exclusive existence without intersections both the lands of Kantara and Bangra progressed in their own way. Until, newly crowned Kulashekhara, the voluptuously reckless son of Rajashekhara infiltrates the sacred land of Kantara for the purpose of wanton hunting (*Kantara: A Legend* 00:16:18).. His obsession with capturing ‘Eshwara’s’ Garden of Bloom proves to be his undoing. But the most staggering revelation of the movie plot comes in the form of princess Kanakavathi’s greed to possess the same charming place of ‘Eshwara’s’ Garden of Bloom. But unlike her brother, her ways are far more measured and surreptitiously deceptive. It is unexpected that the greed of the male kings of Bangra will so potently percolate to the princess Kanakavathi who goes on in a calculated manner deceiving all- her father, her brother and her romantic interest with manipulative charm of righteousness (*Kantara: A Legend* 02:14:16).

This movie is captivating because of its breathtaking representations of various divine entities to protect ecological balance, ensure preservation of 'dharma' and curb flourishing filth of 'adharma' in the sacred land of Kantara. These Daivas make their presence felt in the lives of Kantara people through dream visitations, trance revelations via human medium, empowering upright warrior with divinely supernatural possession to establish heavenly justice. In Kantara Panjurli Daiva, one of the oldest divine spirit is worshipped with utmost faith and devotion. The power, presence and influence of Panjurli Daiva in the lives of people are accurately represented in the movie *Kantara: A Legend, Chapter 1*. The entire existence of the Kantara clan is preserved under the protective wings of the divine boar protector. At the beginning of the narrative, Vijayendra, the cruel king of Bangra after stepping into the Eshwara's Garden of Bloom with foul intentions witnesses the fearful manifestation of Panjurli Daiva in the forest fire (*Kantara: A Legend* 00:06:29). The divine boar spirit keeps a close eye on the activities of the Kantara people, especially proven through the occasion when Berme and his companions mull over the prospect of visiting land of Bangra. Purely reverential spirit is exhibited when Berme and his friends seek blessings of Panjurli Daiva before going outside the longstanding border which separates Kantara from Bangra after the death of King Vijayendra. In this folklore Panjurli Daiva is omnipresent throughout protecting the resources and interests of simple but honest people of Kantara.

Another Gana sent by lord Shiva to protect the sacred Eshwara's Garden of Bloom is Huli Daiva, the embodiment of fierce force of the tiger. The vigilance of this guardian spirit around the village Kantara generally and around Berme particularly is remarkably mystical. Huli Daiva is present when Baidi, the one with dreamy eyes, first discovers newly born Berme left in the sacred seat of power (*Kantara: A Legend* 00:09:40). When extra spices are required to strengthen supply to the port of Bangra for the trading purpose, Huli Daiva leads the group to the inlands of dense forest breaking the charmed partition separating Kantara and land of Kadapa in the process. Berme, initially apprehensive of the dreadful nature of the tiger encountered in the jungle, is soon convinced by the divine radiance emanating from the eyes of the tiger and resigns completely to the guidance of Huli Daiva. When the black magic of Kadapa people proves to be too much to handle, Huli Daiva appears in the form of magnanimous tiger to scatter legions of charmed meerkats to save Berme and his gang from a precarious situation. Huli Daiva kills the sorcerer son of the leader of the Kadapa clan with raw ferocity and disappears into the wilderness leaving no traces behind (*Kantara: A Legend* 01:21:19). Huli Daiva makes the final stunning appearance in the climax of the movie to wipe out the combined evil forces of Kadapa people and Bangra people. Berme indeed is fortunate to have the blessings of Huli Daiva who is the undisputed saviour in his life (*Kantara: A Legend* 02:37:54).

Of all the Daivas entrusted with the task of safeguarding the Eshwara's Garden of Bloom, Guliga Daiva is the fiercest one with infinite raw energy. People of Kantara revere him because of his ruthless enforcement of justice, untamed energy and fierce nature. In the film *Kantara: A Legend, Chapter 1*, Guliga Daiva descends to kill the cruel king Vijayendra to save the land of Kantara. The way of saving the land for Guliga Daiva invariably comes through punishing the wrongdoers. When Kulashekhara, along with the help of his minister Bhogendra wrecks havoc in the land of Kantara by killing the innocent masses and destroying the natural resources, the divine spirit of Guliga possesses Berme and finishes off most of the people who are violating the sanctity of peaceful ambience with forbidden desires (*Kantara: A Legend* 01:50:49). In the climax of the film Chavundi appears to punish the evil princess Kanakavathi because Guliga, being a male deity cannot touch female sinners (*Kantara: A Legend* 02:40:42). All the Daivas in Kantara are presented through the Bhoota Kola dance forms with skilled performers, elaborate costumes and make-ups. The possession by the divine spirit also provides spectacular moments of intense cinematic brilliance. The intimidating cry 'Whoaah' by Guliga Daiva is enough to cause panic to the immoral people with cruel intentions. The energy during such scenes peaks spontaneously and the menacing presence of Guliga Daiva for the perpetrators of evil deeds feels visceral.

Apart from these the narrative also features folkloric traditions of worshipping god in the form of stones kept open under the tree, ceremonial tribal dance, indigenous rituals related to birth and death, the establishment of 'Brahma Kalasha', black magic to gratify foul desires of evil minds. All these folklore materials are dealt with authentic accuracy and deep sense of respect for the Daivas of the Kantara culture. Spectacularly vibrant representation of the religious reverence whets up the curiosity of the viewers to know more deeply about the roots of rich cultural heritage. It also upholds the principle of divine justice in an era of anxiety and insolence. Even if we remove the supernatural and mystic part the value of a calm and focused mind caused by religious practices can never be ignored. Kantara: A Legend, Chapter 1 succeeds greatly in presenting the culture of Daiva worshipping on global level and enlivening at the same time the visceral charm of folk culture.

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