

# Bengaluru and Kannada Cinema

**MK Raghavendra**

When Puneeth Rajkumar, the Kannada film star passed away recently, his family made a request to Bengaluru's (formerly Bangalore) public to maintain peace at least as a gesture towards Puneeth. The star, like his father Rajkumar, Kannada cinema's greatest star, had died of natural causes but violence was still feared. When Rajkumar passed away in 2006, sorrowful fans went on the rampage in the city. A police constable was beaten to death by frenzied mobs and several people were killed in the police firing. The same actor Rajkumar's kidnapping by Veerappan led to arson and looting in 2000, the disturbances continuing sporadically for several months. The action of the Kannada film industry calling for a ban on non-Kannada films - in 2004 - also led to violence. In most cases, the violence is restricted to Bengaluru city and the other towns in Karnataka remain peaceful. It nonetheless tends to get out of hand in every instance and various agencies are blamed but there is no effort to enquire into the causes - perhaps because the disturbances are not 'instigated' but sociological. The question here is whether there is any relationship between Kannada film fandom and the city of Bengaluru that elicits the response. For that we have to understand what the 'constituency' of Kannada cinema is.

**The constituency of a film.** It is now accepted that popular texts intent on reaching a large audience are 'co-authored' by these audiences. What this means is that if the film is dependent on a public, it must tailor

itself to address the concerns of that public, mirror its views on key matters; that public becomes the film's 'constituency'. When a film is successful there is a tendency by other films to repeat certain motifs that made it popular, which means that examining popular film texts of any period helps us understand the public concerns of that moment. That is also why the different cinemas in India are so different from each other: regional films address local audiences while mainstream Hindi cinema addresses a more widely distributed 'pan-national' audience. Within Hindi cinema there is a largely anglophone public addressed by certain films (often with English-sounding titles like *3 Idiots*) while Salman Khan's films (like *Dabangg*) largely target non-English speakers. The star hence plays characters who do not speak English, very different from a film like *3 Idiots*, where the English plays a bigger role. Kannada cinema, in this context, is not a pan-Kannada cinema but largely addressing the Kannada speakers of former Princely Mysore - until recently when Mangalorean cinema from directors like Rakshit Shetty arrived. This leads us to examine Kannada cinema's relationship with Bengaluru as reflected in its films.

**Bengaluru and Kannada.** Bengaluru is in the territory that was once Princely Mysore, under indirect British rule but in 1834, when the Wadiyars were deposed, the British ruled the state for 50 years from Bengaluru beginning with Sir Mark Cubbon. The Wadiyars were placed back on the throne but the character

of Bengaluru had transformed by then since the British brought in service providers from the Madras Presidency (Tamil, Telugu and Urdu speakers) and created the Cantonment area. Bengaluru and its Cantonment became like two different cities (*Peté* and Cantonment) separated by the 'Cubbon Park.' In the area still unofficially called 'Cantonment' a large number of people still do not speak Kannada in areas like Ulsoor and Shivajinagar. The English were also instrumental in establishing a large number of English-medium schools in the same areas and this ultimately helped create a cosmopolitan culture for Bengaluru. The English language is perhaps more at home in Bengaluru than in any other Indian metropolis. After 1947, when public sector investment found Bengaluru suitable, many of those recruited were non-Kannada speakers, creating some resentment among Kannada speakers. Kannada cinema has taken note of this and films are rarely shot in the Cantonment area although much of it is very up-market. In addition, we have to recognise that Princely Mysore regarded itself as a 'nation within a nation' since it was under indirect rule. By and large there are few fruitful romances in Kannada cinema between Mysore Kannadigas and Kannadigas from places like Gulbarga or Raichur which are outside old Mysore since the latter would be 'foreigners'. This is comparable to Aamir Khan not marrying the foreign girl who loves him in *Rang De Basanti*.

**Kannada cinema and Mysore.** On scrutinising Kannada cinema today, we still notice a distinction between being 'Kannadiga' (those with their roots in Mysore, mainly) and being Indian and often, Bengaluru is with India rather than with the Kannada people. When the territory feels close to India, Bengaluru is viewed well, but not at all times. During the period when Devaraj Urs was Chief Minister and close to Mrs. Gandhi, Bengaluru was more favourably viewed by Kannada cinema, but that changed later. Bengaluru has however grown enormously after 2000, as a result of which there was mass migration and it is virtually impossible for anyone in Karnataka not to have dealings with the city. I will demonstrate how this manifests itself in the new millennium in the proliferation of a genre of gangster films focussed on a migrant from rural Karnataka (usually former Princely Mysore) who lives in squalor in the *peté* area and becomes a dreaded gangster, to be eventually killed by the police - who could be seen as emblems of the Central State. The films that I have in mind are those like *Majestic* (2002), *Durgi* (2004), *Kitti* (2004), *Jogi* (2005), *Duniya* (2007) and *Kaddipudi* (2013).

**The gangster genre of the new millennium.** There are an enormous number of films that fit the pattern and I

am only citing a handful. The genre has since died out but, at one point, films like these were successful, and most of their posters featured the protagonist holding a hatchet or chopper in his hand (termed a 'long' in local parlance) smeared with blood, but the films that promised such brutality were milder than one might suppose and the policeman liquidating the dreaded gangster was not even high-ranking. Here are some frequently noticed characteristics of these films in terms of the motifs they exhibit:

- The protagonist is a migrant from a part of Karnataka that came under Princely Mysore, like Mandya or Shimoga, or Tumkur. It would not be Mangalore or Gulbarga. He is poor and finds shelter sleeping on the pavement in an area like Srirampura, eating in the humblest of eateries. In *Jogi*, he is a tribal from MM Hills in Mysore district. In *Duniya*, he is a Dalit from Tumkur who worked in a quarry, cutting stone.
- He has a mother back at home to whom he is devoted. His separation from his mother causes him pain. The mother in popular cinema is a site of virtue which gives the protagonist a moral position. This is like the policeman in *Deewar* having his mother stay with him.
- In Bengaluru, he meets a younger woman who is from a higher social class and they fall in love.
- There is often a rich Bangalorean who lives in a palatial house in an up-market area who is unsympathetic to the poor migrant.
- Due to no fault of his own, he falls foul of some powerful criminal elements and demonstrates his valour as a consequence of which he becomes a dreaded rowdy.
- This brings him into conflict with the police, and his enemy is a relatively low-ranking police officer like Deputy Superintendent of Police.
- There is often an instance of police torture where the bare-bodied protagonist is thrashed by the policeman when he refuses to talk. The policeman's jacket is wet with sweat to indicate the degree of resistance put up by the protagonist to the brutal methods of state authority.
- Eventually the conflict between the protagonist and the police makes it necessary for the police to kill the protagonist.

An aspect of the representations requiring attention is the law being present only in Bengaluru. Even in *Durgi*, which has a village police inspector, the inspector behaves as an agent of Bengaluru's interests. A meaning that can be derived is that the local state authority not only has its headquarters in Bengaluru but also functions, by and large, in its interest. A charge made against the former Karnataka Chief Minister SM Krishna was that he was administering only Bengaluru. Krishna later shifted his constituency

from small-town Mandya to middle-class Bengaluru. The sense of the police being with those from outside because they have economic power is a key motif. It ties in with police vehicles and policemen being targeted in film fan-related violence as after Rajkumar's death. Coming to the adopted viewpoint, not only do the films identify with an outsider or the first-generation migrant, but they also regard his/her complete integration with the city as impossible. The protagonists of *Durgi* take up residence in Bengaluru in a colony named after a woman from a small town ('Mandya Mangamma') and become part of the community there. Migrants in temporary dwellings constitute a special community to Jogi from *Jogi* even when he rules gangland. I also find the impossibility of romance between the migrant and the city girl significant, signifying an unbridgeable gap. More importantly, only rarely as in *Kitty* is the romance taken to a happy conclusion, the girl being from the same village as the male protagonist - sharing his status as a migrant, as it were.

Bengaluru is also designated through its 'city' parts associated with the Kannada rather than with the cosmopolitan population. 'Majestic' is a nerve centre of the city area (as opposed to the showier Cantonment area) and so are Kalasipalyam and Mavalli (which also feature in the titles of Kannada films). Kalasipalyam was a bus terminus catering to private buses going to small towns nearby while Mavalli is nearby. Bengaluru has a population of people speaking every language but language differences within the city are not problematised. One could say that, rather than the conflict being between the Kannada and non-Kannada people within Bengaluru, it is between the entrenched Bangalorean and the migrant, with the possibility of the latter integrating always downplayed. 'Bengaluru', in effect, appears unattainable. Where city films emphasise lavish lifestyles (*Gajini*, Tamil, 2006), the Kannada films also show little interest in conspicuous consumption - as though that might be distasteful to those unable to attain it - and play up the disarray. One traces it to the sense among Kannada film audiences of outsiders having done better economically in Bengaluru than 'sons of the soil' who have often sold farmland cheap to house offices.

**Bengaluru alienated.** Bengaluru has been represented in different ways in Kannada cinema and its first use was perhaps in *Schoolmaster* (1958) when it became the space facilitating romance between Kannada speaking people. This was after the linguistic reorganisation of the states and Bengaluru represented the coming together of various Kannada territories with Bengaluru as the centre. In films like *Raja Nanna Raja* (1976) an outsider moves smoothly into a romance

with a city girl with only the differences in their wealth being problematised while in *Mayor Muthanna* (1969), a migrant becomes Bengaluru's mayor. Given these representations, Bengaluru's portrayal in the above Kannada films has transformed conspicuously. Some years ago, an IT tycoon created a furore when he suggested that the city should be governed from New Delhi - as a Union Territory - to preserve its industrial advantage. The constituency addressed by Kannada cinema was not his concern but this constituency also appears to regard Bengaluru as 'lost'. The city seems unattainable to those from the hinterland, as a space with which migrants might never integrate.

#### Related references

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Kannada movie hoarding (Source: Aliyeh Rizvi)