

**Kannada literary tradition and its subaltern world view***Dr. KY Narayanaswamy**Associate Professor,**Government Science College, Bangalore – 560001*

Twenty years ago, Kannada criticism used to quote GayatriSpivak's name with utmost celebration and gratitude. In those days, we post-graduate students of Kannada literature used to celebrate the word "subaltern" as if it was the Gayatri Mantra without knowing what it meant. The concept of subaltern has raised more discussions in the Department of Kannada than in the Department of History. Many of our peers, afraid to directly approach people like Ki Ram Nagaraj to learn the meaning of subaltern, secretly approached people like us. We would respond saying it is a worldview, it is a new technique to rewrite history through the eyes of the common man.

Further, I still remember our attempts to describe the concept a way of analysing and defining society and power politics from the view of the marginalised and suppressed. To substantiate our arguments, my memories of the effort in selecting examples from old texts still remains fresh after 20 years. But subaltern philosophy used to doubt the literary proofs. In this confusion, I took a step further and attempted to present my PhD thesis on water culture through the subaltern worldview. In my investigative research, my belief that my understanding outside jargon is new started to fade. However, subaltern refers to the viewpoint with which we understand and describe the world. What is celebrated as the past also implies a certain hiding of the truth. Memory and forgetfulness form the organizing events of the happiness and sorrow of the human world. The process of breaking and redefining these times and context is called as subaltern history.

Our past is also shaped by the needs of power politics according to time and space. However, events that are away from space and time remain as the memories of the community because of their dynamic nature. The enthusiasm to identify these tools comes from the subaltern view. Particularly in India, in the time when ancient tools are gaining political importance, it is no surprise that subaltern thinking has come to the forefront. Like this, subaltern studies have pushed to the fore the desire build a people's history. Subaltern philosophy appeared new to us because of its jargon. It also built the illusion that subaltern philosophy acts as a wand to scare away the ghosts of history. However, when the realisation of that knowledge framework dawned on us, we began to suspect that that the same knowledge stream is

inherent as an undercurrent in Kannada literature. For a thousand years, the Kannada language has protected subaltern concerns much like the fire hidden in the shammi tree. We felt we were describing this knowledge in new words.

The European and North Indian thinkers who shaped the subaltern worldview (RanjitGuha, Meenakshi Mukherjee, etc.) tried to pick sources from folklore and collective memory to explain the power structures that defined the construction of history. If the important texts of Kannada literature were available in English or if these thinkers knew of Kannada literature, I imagine that they would have set the starting point of subaltern history as the text Kavirajamarga. “Kurithuodadeyumkavyaprayogaparinitmathigaleenadavargal” meaning “The people of this land can create poetry though they are not literate.” This saying is not limited to one’s capacity to create poetry, it also points out the conflict between the expression of letters and the expression of speech. This saying also highlights how the construction of history has been indebted to the written word. It appears as if there is a jump towards the history hidden in the spoken word.

The sensibilities of first poet of Kannada, during his composition of the epics Adipurana and Vikramarjunavijaya, appear to be those of a marginalised view. Or perhaps, are we reading it in this manner today? This question haunts me. If Pampa did not see from the marginalised view, when he wrote Vikramarjunavijaya which equated the king Arikesari (who was at the centre of history at the time) to Arjuna, he would not have retained the love of the land. When he was rewriting Vyasa’s Mahabharatha through Vikramamarga, he wrote “NeneyadirannaBharathadolinperaruman. NenevodeKarnanamneneya, Karna rasayanamaltheBharatham” meaning “Whoever you may or may not remember in Bharatha, you have to remember Karna, because the Mahabharata is nothing but Karna’s story,” which he wouldn’t have otherwise written. This not a viewpoint that sympathises with Karna. It is the marginalised viewpoint of seeing the world through Karna’s eyes. In the time that caste was considered a value and social status was decided on this basis, Pampa would not have expressed his desire to be born as a cuckoo or a bee in Banawasi. This thought process is a counterpoint to the accepted worldview of the life cycle of animal, human, and divine forms. “Kulamkulamalthu, chalamkulam, anmukulam, abhinamkulam” meaning “Caste does not indicate our caste, perseverance is caste, friendship is caste, self-confidence is caste.” Pampa would not have expressed this courage to proclaim this message to the world. The crowning of Karna in the games arena shows the breaking of the right to power by birth.

We can consider one more example: before the burning of the Khandava forest, during the approach of spring, the Arikesari who is equivalent to Arjuna is approached by a hunter to come join him on a hunt. The poet expresses how the beauty of spring affects both the yogis and the viyogis; he explains this through many examples. Later, when he explains how hegemony and patriarchy wage a war against nature, his voice turns into a lament. This is a strong metaphor for the violence created by authority. Arjuna and Krishna, to show their hunting prowess, celebrate the killing of all the animals in the forest. This situation showcases a view of history through the eyes of the oppressed. We know that in the earlier centuries, the source of history was the epic poems. The thirst of authority to create history can be found in Bharatha's victory expedition in the Adipurana.

With the aid of the chakraratna, after having conquered six continents, the emperor Bharatha rests at the foot of the Vijayadri mountains. He orders his men to get the best of the poets to write of his victorious deeds, which are to be carved into the tallest rockface. But the surprise here is that there is not an inch of writing space left on the rock. Every inch of space speaks of the deeds of the earlier victorious warriors. The lines that explain how Bharatha's pride is broken parodies the creation of history. Adipurana also describes how the soldiers decline to fight this war between the brothers Bharatha and Bahubali. This incident where the soldiers refuse to fight and only the kings fight reflects how the Kannada sensibilities do not support oppression.

The unique poetry of the Vachana movement, which is not found in any other Indian language, also seems like a subaltern thought process. Moreover, the main feature of this movement is the communal discourse involving the socially lowest communities of the hierarchy. Additionally, the fact that women from the lower classes also participated in this movement provides evidence that these Vachanas can be read as the first books of subaltern thinking. All kinds of power politics can be negotiated with the Sharana's viewpoint of "there is no one lower than me." This is the society which controlled communities through religion, caste, untouchability, sin, good deeds, and the concept of heaven and hell. That women of lower castes and classes gained entry into the public domain is a historical fact, and we have had to wait for 800 years to accept that.

Subsequently, Harihara and Ragavanka's poetry builds the story of the lowest of the low as the story of Shiva. This can be explored as a sign of the presence of the subaltern in the Kannada sensibility. The Mathanga maidens of Harishchandrakavya question how the four

elements of the five are lower than the one. These questions evidence how the Kannada creative world has guarded the viewpoint of the oppressed.

In Kanakadasa's Ramadhanyacharithhe, the conflict between paddy and ragi has been narrated from the viewpoint of the marginalised. A fight occurs between paddy and ragi as to who is greater, and they both finally approach King Ramachandra for justice. The paddy and ragi grains are both stored in a granary for year. After they are removed from storage after a year, the paddy grain is spoiled, whereas the ragi grain still retains its life. Rama declares ragi as supreme and renames ragi as Ramadhanya. This work proves that the life-building spirits are alive in the lower castes of society. The eyes of Sarvagna, the wandering saint of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, were always open to the village and the settlements. Lines such as "JathiheenamaneyaJyothithaheenave" (Can the light from the lamp of the low-caste be inferior?) and "Annadevaramundeinnudevaruilla" (There is no god above and beyond the god of food) have always opposed power structures.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century saints such as ShishunalaSharifa and KaivaraNareyana also sang about the conflicts of life. They waged a spiritual struggle against the state, religion, the superstitions of heaven and hell. The subaltern worldview of the Kannada language, preserved in this manner for a thousand years, is expressed in its full force and glory through Kuvempu. It is no coincidence that the issues argued by the subalterns formed the main subjects of Kuvempu's writings. Starting from Kuvempu's Jalagara to his epic novel MalegalalliMadhumagalu, this viewpoint is intertwined through his works. He compares the jalagara who cleans the dirt of the villagers to Lord Shiva who cleans the dirt of the world, the characters Peenchal and Aitha to Shive and Shiva and brings Ekalavya and Shambuka to the midst of a cultural discourse. In Kuvempu's DhanavantriyaChikitse, all the intellectual burdens are carried on the back of the farmer, which makes him suffer.

Overall, if we understand Kuvempu's process, we will see that the subaltern thought process is not alien to us. This understanding can only be obtained through introspection. When we speak of Kannada tradition, we should not consider it as all the works written in Kannada. We find thousands of works that are blind to the marginalised. Only the works that attempt to describe the sorrows of life, thereby defying the historical compulsions of the time, can be considered as the history of Kannada sensibilities. These works contain several trails of subaltern thoughts in them.

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