

Rethinking Conflict in the Western Ghats: A Natureculture Reading of *Kantara* (2022)

Jayaditya Vittal

Manipal Institute of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts (MISHA), Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Manipal, Karnataka, India

Abstract

Kantara (2022) is a Kannada-language film directed by and starring Rishab Shetty. While critically acclaimed, it became immensely popular for centering the lives and the post-colonial conflicts of forest-dwelling Tuluva communities with the Indian State's Forest policies; in particular, it drew together these concerns with the *Bhuta Kola* tradition, unique to the Karnataka Western Ghats, in which a deity is believed to possess a *narthaka*, a performer, and thus provide guidance and warnings. While most readings of *Kantara* (2022) have centred the conflict, and ultimate synthesis, of the State and traditional culture, this paper will attempt to problematise the approach to conflict within the film itself. Drawing from the work of scholars such as Donna Haraway and Pramod Nayar, it utilises the notions of "natureculture" – that nature and culture cannot be neatly separated– and "ecoprecarity" (that ecological conflict directly impacts human precarity in the world) in order to examine the ways in which human lives, and actions, interact with a threatened environment. Juxtaposing this against the specific ecological history of the Western Ghats, this paper posits a reading in which the forest, as a whole, emerges as a co-partner to tribal communities in challenging both pre-colonial feudalism, as well as the post-colonial India state. The ultimate synthesis, then, is not an unequal partnership between tribals and the State, but between forest-dwellers and a biodiversity hotspot as a whole.

Keywords

Western Ghats, ecocriticism, film, Kannada, Tuluva, performance, bhuta kola, natureculture, ecoprecarity.