

Article

MK Raghavendra

Puneeth Rajkumar and Local Identity in Kannada Cinema



Puneeth Rajkumar (17 March 1975 – 29 October 2021)

This is an article about the Kannada star Puneeth Rajkumar who passed away suddenly some months ago, to understand his role as a local icon carrying Kannada sentiments. But we first need to look at the male star in Indian popular cinema more broadly in order to do this since that is at the root of many representations.

If one compares the relationship between protagonist and audience in Hollywood and Indian popular cinema one perceives differences. The relationship engendered by Hollywood is a relatively easy one to explain; one could say that audiences of Hollywood films, by and large, identify with the individualities represented by the protagonists in the sense of trying to see themselves acting in the same way under similar circumstances – or perceiving their mistakes (as in the cases of ‘anti-heroes’). Indian films, (because of a narration less grounded in individual motivation and more deterministic), may

not be allowing identification with the protagonists. Since they are so larger-than-life, we do not place ourselves in their position as much as bask in their ‘being’. The characters also do not transform but remain the same in ‘essence’, the circumstances around them rearranging themselves sometimes almost miraculously. In *3 Idiots* we are hardly led through the process by which Rancho became a famous inventor. ‘Being’ rather than ‘doing’ is the key and it is therefore easy to confuse the star with his/her role – which may also explain the phenomenal success of some film stars as political leaders.

Stars rise into prominence when their physiognomies and screen presences answer to the requirements of the time and it is uncommon for film stars to play against the types they are habituated to playing. This proposition will be contested possibly through the examples of regional film stars – since some like Rajkumar played every kind of role from

divinities and epic heroes to secret agents – and needs elaboration. A point about the popular cinemas is that they narrativize the social experiences of the communities corresponding to their constituencies and there is usually more than one narrative to be dealt with. Immediately after independence, for instance, there was the notion of existential freedom and of modernity with its good and bad sides, as well as the hope of egalitarianism. These were some major narratives but there were many other smaller ones as well. For my purpose it is enough to say that Dilip Kumar introduced the notion of existential freedom through his naturalistic performances in films like *Andaz* (1949), *Jogan* (1950) and *Babul* (1950) in which he moved close to ‘method’ acting. The notion of modernity with its temptations was most famously essayed by Dev Anand as in *Baazi* (1951) while egalitarian hopes, by and large, rode on Guru Dutt (*Aar Paar*, 1954) and Raj Kapoor (*Shri 420*, 1955). In bodies of cinema that are smaller (like Kannada cinema) it is possible for a single actor to play key parts in all narratives pertinent at any given moment. Rajkumar thus addressed the ‘composite Kannada narrative’ in the 1960s through a variety of roles.

Puneeth Rajkumar’s unexpected demise left a vacuum at the top in Kannada cinema because he had risen steadily to be among the most bankable of stars - without it entirely owing to his family connections. He was the youngest of Kannada film icon Rajkumar’s three sons, the others being Shiva Rajkumar and Raghavendra Rajkumar. He was cast as a child star in a number of films under the name Lohith where he also sang. My favourite among his child films is the mythological film *Bhakta Prahlada* (1983) in which Rajkumar played Hiranyaksha and Anant Nag was Narada. All three of Rajkumar’s sons were launched as adult male stars with Shiva, the eldest, being launched in *Anand* (1986), a youth film. It was a success but an even greater success was the second son Raghavendra Rajkumar’s launch vehicle *Nanjundi Kalyana* (1989), an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. Shiva Rajkumar has continued to do well but Raghavendra’s career as a star faltered. Puneeth, whose nickname is Appu did better than his brothers and the following emotional response from a social

scientist Chandan Gowda in Deccan Herald will indicate how his death was taken locally:

“He was a hero who held his individual passions in deference to the community. With the virtues he held, he could be trusted to not betray the community in a modern world that threatened its survival and ensure its continued existence. His characters moved through modern landscapes, affirming with confidence the virtues that mattered to the Kannada community. They touched on the large themes of honesty, courage, fidelity and social duty, to name a few, at a time when this is fast becoming unfashionable in the film industry. Puneeth’s films could therefore earn him a massive following across the cities, towns and villages of the state even when every film he did in his adult life was set in contemporary urban settings.”

The description is not entirely accurate since Puneeth essentially played the language hero and it is simplistic to believe that the hit roles played by stars to hold up local identity are necessarily of virtuous characters. Puneeth’s launch vehicle as an adult star was *Appu* (2002), another youth film like Anand which launched his older brother Shiva Rajkumar. That he got his nickname (‘Appu’) from his success in the film should give one a sense of its importance in his career.

The youth film thrives when there is disaffection between generations and with an older order. To convey a sense of *Appu*, the protagonist is a young man known for his toughness and his life is saved - after being brutally attacked by enemies - by a girl Suchi who gives him blood and later becomes his classmate, and who he decides to marry. Appu’s father objects to his unruly ways and he is a head-constable while the girl’s father is the police commissioner. Appu’s father is actually a sycophant and Appu hates both him and the police. To him, family is mother and not father and his mother loves him wholeheartedly. The fact that he and Suchi are from different classes – although both their fathers are employees of the state - does not deter him because the informal power he wields as a toughie is more than the formal power wielded by the senior policeman (IPS), who is against him. Giving him some of this informal power is his being President of

the Rajkumar Fan's Association. The film has a sequence in which members of the association, led by Appu, stone a cinema hall for not providing them with tickets to a Rajkumar film. When the girl Suchi falls in love with him, her father tries to have Appu liquidated but fails.

We must understand that when the film was made there was deep local disaffection because the state government was seen to be on the side of the rich and privileged. Chief Minister SM Krishna was an emblem of anglophone sophistication and had instituted a task force called the BATF (Bangalore Agenda Task Force) in which many of the prominent businesspersons of Bangalore – especially of the IT industry who have helped up English education - were members. Kannada cinema caters to a constituency that feels injured by this deference to anglophones and *Appu* was cashing in on that. The hostility towards policemen habitually shown by Kannada cinema – with the torture of locals by policemen being a routine ingredient in films - is essentially from the sense that the state machinery is anti-local and is in the service of the well-heeled outsider. A motif in Kannada cinema is police torture and it is the protagonist who has to undergo it. The policeman's jacket is wet with sweat to signify the effort involved in quelling the protagonist's spirit, which ultimately refuses to submit. Appu therefore represents the locals discriminated against by the state in cosmopolitan Bengaluru with the police as visible agents of their suppression.

In his later films Puneeth did not stray particularly from this kind of cinema and that may mark him out from his brother Shiva, who makes much blander films (*Kaddipudi*, 2013). He used the motif of the love story between socially disparate people, Puneeth playing a tough subaltern like a fitness or swimming instructor as in *Aakash* (2005), with the title of the film often the same as that of the male protagonist. Very often the character played by him is a rowdy or the son of a rowdy as in *Vamshi* (2008), in which his father has been murdered by the opposite gang, with *the assistance of policemen* and

politicians. In *Abhi* (2003), the protagonist is in love with a Muslim girl, which is resisted by her parents. The villains chosen by the films he stars in also tend to carry a hint of the non-local. The villain in *Anjani Putra* (2017) is named Bhairava and the protagonist played by Puneeth follows him to Jodhpur to kill him. He also made 'wholesome romances' like *Milana* (2007) but even that film begins with the protagonist being tortured by the police.

Puneeth was an action star and it was hence necessary for him to be a fitness enthusiast to play the above kind of roles, where he usually plays a local who has been discriminated against and whose rage is rising. No other contemporary Kannada is quite like him since those like Darshan or Yash are well-muscled or masculine (Yash has been sporting facial hair recently) but do not convey the kind of violent emotions he could be relied upon to communicate to the Kannada public, that have felt the same emotions that his films draw upon.

A factor not emphasized hitherto is the importance of Bengaluru as a locale in most of these films. Bengaluru has an ambivalent presence in Kannada cinema because the anger expressed by 'Appu' is largely the anger of locals against the city for their sidelining by outside interests - that are not usually named. There is a sense that locals have lost influence and wealth with the growth of Bengaluru and migration from outside. As an instance many local people have sold their farm lands at throwaway prices in Bengaluru to house offices and malls and are living in reduced circumstances, often being employed in them in low jobs. The Kannada-speaking local person roughly feels what the Marathi-speakers feel in Mumbai but there is no local Kannada political party – equivalent to the Shiv Sena – to address their concerns. The role played by Kannada cinema is partly to address the feelings of local Kannadigas, with Bengaluru increasingly becoming the contested site. It is in this context that Puneeth Rajkumar's iconic presence should be seen, the evidence of anger carried by his films.

Mr. MK Raghavendra is a film scholar and critic and the author of *Bipolar Identity: Region, Nation and the Kannada Language Film* (Oxford University Press, 2011). He is a former secretary of FIPRESCI-India, based in Bangalore.