

Certificate of Merit:

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Kantara: A Giant Leap of Faith



In a world where faith plays a role bigger than most tangible forces, a filmmaker subjects himself to hand burns when he touches upon a subject lingering on the realms of faith. In such cases, catering to both the volatile and the reasoning audiences is a challenge, given multiple examples in the past where the boycott trend has consumed a number of films irrespective of their content. Does artistic freedom expand to matters of faith at all? Regardless of what a filmmaker might believe, he must have strong predicaments about any matter of faith he intends to adopt in his movie and be willing to defend it with

his life. Perhaps only then an unapologetic film like Kantara can be made.

Kantara means 'mystical forest'. A thick forest, the fountainhead of all life in and around it in some remote part of Coastal Karnataka, is the central element around which Rishab Shetty, the maker and lead actor of Kantara, has devised a story with many aspects that keep a viewer extremely busy through the span of the movie. The fast-paced, aesthetically delightful musical movie garnered unforeseen fame in the Kannada film industry. The foundational concept of the film? Faith. It was no short of a gamble for Rishab Shetty to make a film centred on one

of the most sensitive matters in Coastal Karnataka – *Bhootaradhane* or spirit worship – and add so many elements of mass appeal to it. Things could have gone wrong because impersonation of the *daivas*/ imitation of *Bhootaradhane* for entertainment purposes is rigorously condemned in Coastal Karnataka and can mobilise the audiences against the film maker.

No matter how advanced the technologically equipped world gets, faith remains a relevant playground for politicians and filmmakers. The perception points among audiences, however, have evolved. *Adipurush* (2023) is not received the same way *Sampoorna Ramayan* (1961) was received. Two extremities co-exist wherein one end expects absolute compliance to the mythological scripts even in modern-day films, and on the other end, modern-day, storytellers are expected to rationalise the plots ‘based in mythology’ and make them contemporary, inclusive, and politically correct. While *Kantara* does not attempt the rationalisation of *Bhootaradhane*, Rishab Shetty has created a delicate balance between autonomy of faith and rationale that can, to some extent at least, allure both ends of the audience.

A land dispute between a community that resides on the outskirts of a thick forest and the landlord of the same village is arguably the unidirectional storyline of *Kantara*. If not for it, the film is a lifestyle blog of the Tuluva community residing in Coastal Karnataka. A lifestyle blog that has been created and filmed by native filmmakers because it exudes love and pride with no frame spared. Shetty and team have unequivocally, unapologetically embraced

every aspect of Tulu culture, starting from Kambala (marshy field buffalo race) to cuisine (references to favouritism towards fish are unmissable) and made it a deliberate point to weave them into the storyline. The film is thus a comprehensive documentation of the rural and tribal Tulu lifestyle constructed in the most natural setup, complete with crude, colloquial dialogues infused with sometimes aggressive, sometimes comical slang.

“The biggest mistake man makes is assuming he owns anything at all. Where everything was before he arrived on earth, where it all shall go after he leaves, no one knows”, claims the film at the very beginning when an older Rishab Shetty narrates the story of the *daiva* (guardian spirit or demigod as referred to in the movie) to his young son, whose older version is played by himself. One hundred acres of land is bestowed to the villagers by a former ruler of the land upon the demigod’s sermon, who promised peace and protection in return. Absolute faith in the supernatural element that protects their land is seen among villagers as *Panjurli* and *Guliga*; the demigods are devotedly worshipped on the land they were generously granted. Conflict arises when a disbeliever comes into the picture - a successor of the royal family who realises the value of the land that was simply given away to the villagers and challenges the *daiva* over his authenticity. The film very naturally places faith over practicality. It vilifies the non-believer in this context, even satisfyingly showcasing his unnatural death, but interestingly brings in another non-believer who later turns into a powerful ally. The role of the newly deputed forest officer Muruli, played by Kishor, is a

beautifully placed element of rationality in a film made primarily for believers.

Apart from the brilliant, eye-catching screenplay that appeases the native audience highly, Rishab Shetty's second claim to success is that of the carefully written male characters in *Kantara*. The female characters don't get much of an arc individually. The feministic standpoint is based on holism, as it can be well observed that women are left untouched in terms of their lifestyle choices and are generally unabashed. Even though they aren't too included in the social hierarchy, they aren't subservient to males. Gender plays no role in the indigenous socio-cultural system where coexistence is the norm. The conflict being much more significant and mystical, the film has paid little heed towards incorporating modern-day feministic ideals into the story, or even that of caste equality.

Muruli plays the most powerful character despite not being the protagonist. On one end, the protagonist, Shiva (played by Rishab Shetty), is a carefree brute who collides with the forest officer pretty much simply because he can but is a villager harbouring natural faith in the supernatural element that protects their land. On the other end is the sly, composed landlord, Devendra Suttur, who ensures the village's well-being only to be revealed as the wicked non-believer at the end who eyed his ancestral land from the beginning. Muruli, also a non-believer, fights vigorously with the villagers to protect the forest until he realises they are the victims of a giant conspiracy and then sides with them. Muruli and Shiva befriend each other with lines that acknowledge the other's bonding with the forest – Shiva says

he listened carefully, and the trees spoke to him. Muruli humours him, stating that perhaps the *daiva* would talk to him if he listened. The non-believer who adds an element of modern-day rationale into the film later deftly fuses into the streamlining of faith and embodies a pluralistic, accepting standpoint.

The male characters of the film constitute a loud, funny and loyal camaraderie, a crafty villain who harbours an extended revenge plan and quite easily scams the unsuspecting villagers, a forest officer standing tall and strong, a subdued yet endearing cousin (Guruva) who takes the mantle of being the *paatri* when Shiva evades from the responsibility, alongside some more characters that stay in the periphery such as the Panchayat representative and the armoury owner form the impressive male cast of *Kantara*. Of course, Shiva leads them with a casual, rather uncivilised demeanour. He is a simple man with a loud physical presence matched with a temper that makes him look like a brute. His personal growth from a loitering village goon to a *daiva paatri* like his father is also a notable subset of the bigger story.

Though in the end, a viewer could feel like everything in the movie was leading to the carefully choreographed climax where Rishab Shetty gives his best performance, the film has placed Easter eggs throughout. The story of *Panjurli* and *Guliga*, two guardian spirits evoked in the movie and their unfinished business brews beneath the surface even as the story proceeds in comical and progressive instances. *Panjurli*, the Lord protector impersonated during the film's ceremonies, is a comparatively subtler deity.

Guliga, his sentinel, on the other hand, is a fierce, brute spirit who arrives with great aggression and spares no offence. Even though Shiva decided not to impersonate the *daiva* after his father's disappearance, he was constantly reminded of the ferocity within him and to channel it in the right direction through dreams and symbolic appearances of the *Panjurli daiva*. In the end, *Guliga* possesses Shiva at the beckoning of *Panjurli* to punish the wrongdoers. *Guliga* only makes his presence known once, and all other times, it is the master who silently protects. Rishab Shetty did his research before bringing the spirit worship concept on screen, for the demeanours of both *daivas*, when impersonated, are drastically different from each other and are enacted to the point of precision. In regard to the representation of the aspects of faith, especially Bhootaradhane, which is an elaborate ritual, *Kantara* has made no mistake and, hence, has managed to steer clear of any controversy. All cultural elements have been treated with reverence and the resulting unapologetic tone of the movie has accorded well with the native audience.

Essential scenes of the film shot in the dark do well to reflect the intensity the movie attempts to convey with the title 'Kantara'. There are no extreme close-up shots except for the face of the *daiva*; the story is narrated with mid-length shots and no distraction from the aesthetic rural mise-en-scène. Arvind Kashyap (cinematographer) has resisted the

temptation to do anything extraordinary with his camera; there's too much going on anyway. Rishab Shetty and his contemporaries Rakshith Shetty and Raj B Shetty have aced the art of visual language by showcasing the Tulu land in their films. *Kantara*, alongside films like *Ulidavaru Kandante* and *Garuda Gamana Vrushabha Vahana*, are epitomes of cinematographic representation of the Tulu land. Ajaneesh Loknath's music makes its presence known throughout the movie by adding further volume to the grandeur/action on screen.

Despite being a profoundly religious faith-oriented film, *Kantara* does not inspect any theological concept nor undertake an enquiry. True to what Susan Sontag said- "Film is not just a medium for storytelling. It's a medium for exploring the human condition" *Kantara* explores with evident love the way of life of a rural Tulu community in the 80s. It has been too loud and too much for some people's taste, but Rishab Shetty can't seem to help it. In an interview with Anupama Chopra, Rishab Shetty made it clear that *Kantara* manifests his faith in the culture he was born into and brought up with. The film, clearly an auteur one, has exhibited many of the major aspects of the Tulu lifestyle, including mystical elements. A filmmaker venturing so deep into the realms of faith and presenting the same with unapologetic compliance without feeling the need to 'civilise the brutes' or 'explicate the surreal' is a fresh, exciting approach.