

Reimagining and Remembering the Indian Itihaas through Ritualistic Theatre of Worship: A Study of Chandrashekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami*

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Adapting the technique of Bayalata, a folk theatre form of North Karnataka, Chandrashekhar Kambar in his play *Jokumaraswami* delineates upon the themes of worship, fertility, oppression, stimulation and sacrifice. By exploring the tradition of worshipping a phallic God, Jokumaraswami, Kambar attempts to bring forth the idea that oblation of one leads to continuation of others. The themes of worship and fertility occupy a center stage in the play where Basanna like a 'Dionysian figure' becomes a scapegoat to help others prosper. The hint of this we get in the Prologue itself whereby Sutradhar sings the story of Lord Shiva's son

Jokumaraswami, addressing him as "Lord of the green and Lord of abuse", who was killed on the sixth day of his birth. The play is a part of the back-to-the-roots movement of the 1970s in which dramatists attempted to design connections with the history and mythology of their own soil. The play operates on a four-pronged quest- to practically be more 'Indian' in the years after independence, to stand in contrast to the Western model of theatre which had been acquired without much resistance by the preceding dramatists, to rewrite the Indian history with the purpose of bringing it to the realm of national and global considerations and to revive, reimagine and remember the ancient notions of folk music, dance and color in theatre. This study attempts to understand how the celebration of myth and realization of history of worship in *Jokumaraswami* sets the stage for collective participation and the existing rituals call for a much broader appeal of retreating back towards the roots and reclaiming the 'folksiness' which has the potential of impacting the thought processes on a global level.

The excitement that Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* generates gains impetus because of the various events that club together during the course of the play: the

folk tradition, the myth of fertility, prosperity, annihilation for communal good and the interplay of contemporary political narratives. Kambar here has made use of a folk tale concerning fertility to demonstrate his concerns about impotency and to shed some light on the patriarchal tendency and notion of possessing everything even if it remains 'untouched' by him.

The writings of Kambar are seen to revolve around images, symbols, stories and pictures. In this play he uses the symbol of Jokumaraswami who is a phallic God and is worshipped to this day in villages of North Karnataka in the month of August-September (Jokumara Hunnive, i.e. full-moon night got its name from him). On the day of this festival, women build up phallusshaped idols of Jokumaraswami and carry the same to the nearby households and combine the festivities with folk music and dance with the involvement of people from every strata of the society. The entire concept shares a deep relationship with rain, where it is believed that even a totally rain devoid month would end with rain on Jokumara Hunnive. One of the most important stories of Jokumaraswami in folklore is the ancient myth of Lord Shiva's son Jokumaraswami. From the day of his birth till the sixth day, he succeeds in seducing all the women of village and on the seventh day he is killed with ritual cruelty by the cuckolds of the village. The places where his blood meets the soil, turn green and fertile. This forms an important understanding of the play whereby the consanguinity between human fertility and fertility of Earth are not to be treated separately. Humans live in close proximity with nature and this bonhomie defines their mutual dependence and peaceful coexistence.

The plays of Kambar essentially convey the idea that sociological and psychological imbalances gain impetus through the prolonged deprivation of sexual

pleasure and productivity in men and women alike. Through the character of Gowda in the play, he brings forth the concept of materialistic greed and consequent pillage of life forces resulting in sterility. The constant stress on reinvigoration and phased resurrection of human's concordance with the *elan vital* through the systematic parity provided by the faculties of instinct, imagination, reverence, respect, devotion and brotherhood can progressively help in re-establishing the ancient cord with the immediate surroundings. The stock-pile for such resumption has its place in our rich folk culture. Kambar has always tried to steer towards this very folk culture through his folk drama. He admits:

I belong geographically to a village, and sociologically to what was considered to be an oppressed, uneducated class. I am, therefore, a folk person simply because I honestly cannot be anything else. (Lal 148)

His poem *Helatena Kela* is a reflection of his 'folksian' roots where like a master craftsman he handles the themes of fertility, impotence and drought. In almost all of his works Kambar tries to discredit the claims of escapism that are often lodged at folk narratives wherein they are taken under the garb of criticism for their excessive reliance on dance, music and poetry which often results in partial oblivion of action. Kambar is of the view that folk theatre contributes in compensating for the deprivations that humans face and constructively assist them in rising as a wholesome being without the strangles of the imposed disadvantageous survival in the contemporary world. He considers art, dance, songs, poetry as inseparable and indispensable components of society and by virtue of being an important wheel of society they succeed in existing both in collaboration with their immediate surroundings and at the same time define their respective boundaries and situate themselves within the wide ambit of folk culture which exerts significant influence on the mental, physical, societal, emotional, cognitive and psychological existence of human beings and at the same time also inculcate the notions of inclusivity and coexistence. He is of the opinion that:

"A Londoner finds his dance, song, drama and religion at different places [but] a man from my village looks for all these things together" (Lal, 150). Careful studies of the folk theatre forms convey the idea that the experiences that these art forms create, occur not only

at the subconscious level but they percolate to the intellectual level as well. The sensuousness is triggered by the effective use of dance and music and this facilitates better communication and dissemination of ideas. Since *Jokumaraswami* is a part of the back-to-theroots movement therefore we see that it moves away from the proscenium theatre which gained its roots in the colonized nations by distorting the pre-existing regional theatrical forms. Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes in *Decolonising the Mind*, "...its [colonialism's] most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture... To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others [...] the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature." (Thiong'o 17). The Theatre of Roots tried to shed away this colonial heritage and the dramatists in the post-independence setting used folk theatre as a dominant tool in their hands to resist the colonial remnants. It assisted in the reflection of people's own cultural identity and to reinvigorate the drama forms by making it culturally and socially relevant in such a way that they stand as an adequate paragon for rich ancestral past of the nation. It attempted to add a new vigor to the way theatre was structured and conceptualized in the country.

The ritual of worship in the play *Jokumaraswami* occupies a pivotal position. Generally, a play begins by offering prayers in the praise of Lord Ganesha but in the beginning of the play prayers are offered to Jokumaraswami who is represented through a snakegourd on the stage. Since Jokumaraswami is the brother of Lord Ganesha, his worship is justified by the Sutradhara by narrating the greatness of this God:

SUTRADHAR: On this auspicious occasion, if barren women offer worship to this god, and afterwards make a curry out of him to feed their husbands, dozens of children will be born in a jiffy. (3)

The titles of all the scenes of the play briefly indicate their contexts. This is emblematic of the stage effect device of alienation as used by Bertolt Brecht in his plays. In the first scene titled

"Musket God" Gowda is introduced as an influential figure who moves around with a retinue of men but at the same time he is satirically addressed as a *Dum Dum* God because of the sound that his musket makes. An

alteration of Gowda can be seen in the character of Basanna who is a confident, fearless and lovable young man who adheres to the concept of equality that should necessarily exist in society and this is why he constantly talks about justice being meted out for his dead father:

BASANNA: Gowda, let me tell you something loud and clear. I know how my father died. I know how he carved a field from out of a forest. I know how I shall never give up that field.

GOWDA: Since you know so much, do you also know that your father had borrowed money?

BASANNA: Whichever way you look at it, it was only 200 rupees. For twenty years, he gave you half his produce every year, and the loan is still not repaid?

(Lal 11).

Gowdathi, Gowda's wife is introduced with her peculiar set of struggles where she is constantly unhappy because even after ten years of her marriage she could not bear any child. The first scene thus discusses the twin concepts of exploitation and infertility. As is seen many of Kambar's plays, here also we get to see the literal teaming up of images and symbols and this tempts to explore the symbolism that he is trying to explore here.

In the scene "Rise and Come, Beloved Parrot", the parrot is symbolized as a harbinger of ripeness, positivity and rejuvenation. Praises are sung for it by the Mela:

MELA (sings): Rise and come to us, beloved parrot, relishing the eastern breeze and filled with moonlight.

Bring to the parched earth the season of blossoming flowers, O bird of distant lands.

Hearts are filled with sand, nests droop from the gaunt tree, the young in the womb cry, disconsolate even early in the night.

Anxious I stand. Come. (Lal 19).

The parrot in the play is representative of many things and therefore can be considered as a symbol of multiple significance. On one hand parrot can be compared to a lover for whom perpetual longing persists. Gowdathi in the play craves for a lover who would embrace and sooth her and would help her in shedding away everything that troubles her mind, body and soul. The dreams that she has at night also talk of her wish to possess a parrot:

GOWDATHI: There was a full moon. A rainbow-coloured parrot was sitting on a tree in our garden. Even in the moonlight its colours were shining. Then, for some reason, everyone started laughing. Up there our moon was growing smaller and smaller like a rusted coin. (Lal 17)

The parrot can also be seen as a child who is desired by a childless woman like Gowdathi who wishes to have a child who would eradicate her lonesomeness and would add new joy vigor to her mundane and monotonous life. It is during the ritualistic killing of Basanna that he asks

Gowdathi to "Run and save the parrot's life...you will find me wherever the parrot is." (Lal49) If seen in a rustic way, the parrot can also be interpreted as phallus. Throughout the play Gowdathi mentions that Basanna has a parrot who can talk and eventually Gowdathi and Basanna develop a romantic relationship. In the section titled "The Defeat of Dum Dum God", we see that Gowda gets to know the parentage of his wife's child:

GURYA: That's right! Gowda, Basanna had a parrot and he gave it to Gowdathi.

Gowdathi swallowed it, and now her tummy is like this!" (Lal 46)

It is in the last section titled "The God is Slain" where Basanna like a 'Dionysion figure' is murdered ritualistically because he is believed to have had sexual relations with many women like Lord Shiva's son Jokumaraswami. His death signals the beginning of a new era, inspires people to rise against tyranny, to claim their own rights to the land they till and make productive the land, that the landlord has turned unproductive through sheer negligence and inattention (Behera, 151). Kambar has therefore tried to club the issue of ownership of land with the issue of fertility, worship and productivity. The worship of Jokumaraswami is emblematic of reinstating the presently lost and intertwined relations with the life forces and at the same time it calls for retreating towards primordial energies that are the ultimate reservoirs of our shared cultural heritage. The contemporary socio-political holds sway throughout the play and is displayed abundantly towards the play's culmination by Sutradhara:

SUTRADHARA: They have slashed and thrown him

And the flowing blood

Fills the river end the pond.

Where the blood falls,
Springs the sprout and the shoot,
And all the earth is fresh, is green.
Let a good government rule us,
Let children play in all homes,
May he who sows own the field,
May the country be filled with wealth and grain.
Come, my little lord
Come, my pretty moon
Come, Jokumaraswami! (Lal 50)

The ending and its deification portrays Basanna as a martyr for the cause of fertility and prosperity of others thus making him a scapegoat for the betterment of his brethren. Perceived as an offender of societal conduct and swinging between the extremes of righteousness and potency, Basanna is canonized at the hands of the community. The play strives to sow seeds for a revolution but in effect falls short by ending as a tragedy that upholds ritual, faith and worship as its cardinal elements.

The existing difference between the world of entertainment and the actual world contains a lot of meaning for the understanding of the folk narratives in the literary discourse. In *Jokumaraswami* this inherent difference dissipates by situating the realm of entertainment in the context of the microcosmic nature of the primitive folk culture which stands the testimony of time and the constant evolution of contemporary narratives in the field of literature and otherwise. Clichéd and oft-repetitive claims of ineptness that are hurled against such narratives in the literary sphere tend to lose their relevance when the societal relations are seen in the context of the re-emerging trends of clubbing together the zone of reality with that of creativity and ingenuity. The systematized phenomenon of decimating the role of Indian mythology and history does not hold much ground in the context of the trends that are taking shape in the sphere of folk narratives. The religious framework in which this entire mechanism operates acts as a bedrock for laying stronger and much more resilient framework for the resumption of the folk theatre across nations. The stalwarts in this domain of folk theatre are people like Girish Karnad, Chandrashekhar Kambar, H. Kanhailal, Saonli Mitra, Habib Tanvir, Yugal Das etc.

Talking of the question of the relevance of the folk theatre and its presumptive resilience in the face of the tide of the post-modern scenario, the debate about the

longevity of the folk theatre necessarily holds some good. In this context, Kambar is of the view that:

Folk theatre, like language, is always adequate to the needs of its users at any given point in time. It will be valid as long as its users need it to be. If change occurs with the slow gradualness of history, it will survive into future times. If apocalyptic change occurs, it will not survive. But then, neither will its users. (Lal 151)

Folk theatre's longevity thus tends to surpass the claims of escapism and relevance to embark upon the trajectory of sustained interest and contemporary appositeness.

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