



Creating Modern Myths: Representing Animals in Kannada Cinema

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Abstract

This essays looks at the issue of representation of animals in films, before the time the discourse of animal rights became fashionable, and came to be invoked in cinema. It looks at the specific instance of a Kannada film, *Jayasimha* (1987, dir. P. Vasu) in which the hero as a forest official protects animals from smugglers and hunters, and the relationship that develops between the hero's family and an elephant, which is imbued with human qualities and emotions in the film. Here the article argues that man-animal relation is cast within mythological elements, which offer the framework and rationale for guiding human interaction with creatures of the forest.

Keywords: *animals, representation, Kannada cinema, mythology, anthropomorphism*

The multilayered meanings of animals are tethered to the historically-specific norms and values of the society in which they occur, and it is widely acknowledged that the shaping of the social world is accomplished in large part by cultural representations - those depictions, illustrations, likenesses, icons, and pictures that are produced by a culture [Kalof 2007].

What was it for the Kannada cinema to highlight the necessity of protecting animals from human encroachment and cruelty much before the increased legal pressure on the film makers and producers to be aware and be sensitive about animal rights and post-industrial disclaimers such as “No animals were harmed in this film”? What conceptualization of animals shaped the theme of animal-protection in Kannada cinema? In a country such as India where animals are worshipped, how do we understand the notion of ‘protection of animals’? What are the terms of human intervention in protecting the animals? This article addresses these questions by examining the representation of animals in Kannada cinema as acts of socio-religious beliefs and



by analyzing the terms of objectifying animals so as to highlight human qualities. For this, it specifically focuses on a film song of a Kannada film *Jayasimha* (1987). The article argues that the terms of protection of animals in films such as this were in accordance with socio-religious beliefs of the protector who ultimately re-creates a hierarchy of animals to suit his beliefs and decides which animal is eligible for protection.

Relating to Animals: Kannada Animal-Films of the 1980s

There was a series of movies which dealt with the theme of violation of animal rights, animal-human conflicts, wilderness/civilization and the protection of animals such as *Nagarahole* (1977), *Rama-Lakshmana* (1980), *Kaadina Raja (King of Forest, 1985)*, *Mrugalaya (Zoo, 1986)*, *Jayasimha* (1987) and *Gandada Gudi-2 (Temple of Sandalwood, 1994)*. A common thread that bound these films is anthropocentrism and self-imposed responsibility of man to protect animals from the cruel hands of “villains” who for their selfish motives target the animals. This theme occurred in the Kannada cinema to reflect upon the detrimental activities of selfish human beings against the natural habitats and simultaneously, to reflect upon the human beings as the savior of the animals. Intrusion and disruption in the animal life of the forests parallel the rise in technological development and the implicit exponential growth in the human ability to negatively impact the environment. In this context, beginning with the 1980s, the predominant theme of humans as disruptive and dangerous becomes apparent through recurrent references to human avarice at the expense of natural habitats and vivid imagery of hunting, skinning and gutting animals, hunting for leisure in the forests or illegal poaching for body parts of elephants and other animals. These films reveal previous or contemporary hunting of birds or animals and

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intrusion of “increasing civilization” of human beings. This awareness of man’s harmful role in the natural world and the ultimate responsibility of the “hero” in protecting the animals from extinction are captured in these films. In these films, man performs double role. That is, he is both a villain in harming the animals as well as a hero in protecting them. In other words, ironically, perpetrators and protectors are both human beings in these movies. Animals are brutally killed or smuggled by the “villains” on the one hand; they are sympathetically rescued by the “heroes” on the other. Thus animals become object for the filmmakers to reflect upon the “dark” and “bright” sides of human beings. Conservation of forest and animals, in tune with the modern law, or destruction of it, in violation of law, are both in the hands of human beings.

Illustrations and images of destruction of animals in these films along with conservation efforts by the “hero” are not natural acts but are imbued with traditionally inherited notions about natural animals. In fact, the modern concerns of protection of animal life are based on the received notions of “good” and “bad” animals. These notions are inevitably tied to the socio-religious sensibility of the Hindus whose base are folktales, ancient Hindu legends or myths. The film song of *Jayasimha* corroborates this point. Rescuing of an elephant from the attack of crocodile by the hero of the film makes implicit reference to a Hindu myth of *Gajendra Moksha*. Before dwelling more on this film-song let us know more about the Hindu conception of animals in relation to the myth of Gajendra Moksha.

Hindus and Received notions of animals

To address the aforementioned questions, it is inevitable to ponder over the question of animals in the larger life of Indians, especially the Hindus. This will act as background to the main argument of the article. Animals are integral part of Indians and their life. It is so much that some animals are elevated by the Indians to assume the status of god. Human-form Gods and animal-form Gods are both revered and worshiped in India, especially by the Hindus who have

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maintained heterogeneous beliefs about the animals since time immemorial. Sometimes both kinds of animals (Human-form Gods and animal-form Gods) complement each other and symbolize several ethical, religious and moral issues, if one wants to interpret them from this point of view. Indian folktales, myths and legends lend support to such Hindu beliefs, representations and interpretations. Both kinds of gods co-exist in the cognitive world of the Hindus. However, such co-existence does not mean that harmonious relations exist between humans and animals in India. Reverence or worship of an animal-god is socially specific and historically contingent. While some animals are attributed godly qualities (such as elephant, eagle, snake, etc.), other animals (such as dogs, buffalos, fox, wolf, etc.) are debased, castigated and killed. Though animals are attributed certain moral qualities, which are virtually universal, they are imbued with caste/religious fervor in Hindu social life. Such attributions are always ideologically driven. For instance, *Garuda* is the mount (vahana) of the god Vishnu who is universally worshipped by the Brahmins, Nandi (bull) is the vehicle of god Shiva who is largely worshiped by the non-Brahmin Shaivites. Social and religious divisions of these two social forces are, thus, articulated in the interpretation and representation of animals too. Numerous creative writings, paintings, sculptures and beliefs reinforce such representations. Most of these animals/birds are either servants of the Hindu gods or meant for symbolizing the power and glory of Hindu gods/goddesses. “Such a viewpoint is subtended by the ideology of speciesism-which holds that in terms of their moral worth and ontological status animals are inferior to and subservient to humans” (Donovan, 2011: 203). Though some animal-gods do enjoy independent life of their own such as Hanumanta (monkey-god), their origin and importance are always associated with human-gods. In fact, Hanumanta is the ardent devotee of Rama, the mythological god. Hindu myths, legends and epics are full of references to such animals.

However, in the modern life of the Hindus, animals do not always represent beliefs. As said briefly above, the animals are embellished with certain moral qualities in accordance with their “instinctive” behavior and life patterns. These qualities are not necessarily associated with

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Hindu beliefs of the above kind. While some animals are described as “problem animals” (Donovan, 2011: 203) with derogatory phrases such as savage beasts, predatory, cruel, threatening, parasitic, remorseless, destructive, noisy, incorrigible, inauspicious, (such as crocodiles, bears, foxes, wolves, bandicoots, leopards, tigers, lions, cats, etc.), other animals are praised for their sober qualities and friendly nature (such as dogs, elephants, bulls, deer, sheep, cows, etc.). Yet, among the Hindus, sober and friendly qualities of the above animals and traditional beliefs, many a times, converge and are associated with religious life. In the contemporary world, the Hindu beliefs about the animals have not remained merely “personal” religious beliefs. They are articulated in different media such as literature, sculptureⁱ, paintings, newspapers, films and other electronic media. Virtually, such representations subscribe to the above Hindu beliefs of the animals. In fact, these media have re-affirmed and strengthened the existing beliefs of the Hindus. One such powerful and reverberating myth is *Gajendra Moksha* (The Liberation of Gajendra, the elephant). A brief introduction to this myth is necessary here for further discussion on the film song in question.

Gajendra Moksha is a Puranic legend of the *Bhagavata Purana*, one of the most sacred books of the Hindus, more specifically of the Brahmins. It narrates the story of one of the famous exploits of Vishnu, the Vaidik god. In this episode, Vishnu came down to earth to protect Gajendra, the elephant, from the clutches of Makara, the Crocodile, and with Vishnu's help, Gajendra achieved moksha, or salvation (See Figure 1). Gajendra then attained a form like that of the god (Sarupya Mukti) and went to Vaikuntha (the abode of God) with Vishnu. This story was narrated by Suka to emperor Parikshit at Parikshit's request.



(Figure 1). If observed closely, one can see variety of fauna i.e. a snake held by an eagle which is rode by Vishnu; elephants on the bank of the river and a ferocious crocodile. Vishnu has come down to save an elephant whose leg is caught by a crocodile. The elephant has held a lotus in obeisance to the god and praying Him to save. It is crying out of pain. The other elephants, unable to save the elephant, are looking at the scene helplessly. Every element in the figure can be interpreted from spiritual, religious or ethical point of view. This story is believed to propagate the principles of devotion, humility and prayer of the elephant and kindness of Vishnu towards his devotees who have to surrender to receive His blessings. This surrendering is in itself an indicator of sincere devotion of a devotee. Whatever may be the symbolic, allegorical or metaphorical meanings associated with the myth, human intervention in the form of “God-as-



savior” is the main highlight here and animals are reduced to mere symbols in such myths. They unambiguously and historically show intervention of “culture/civilization” into nature as something inevitable. Not only this, a hierarchy of animals is created here which will be sustained throughout. While crocodile, which might have caught the elephant for its food which is a natural episode in the animal life of the forests, is punished for its predatory vice while the elephant which prays to god is saved. The myth reinforces simplistic notions of “good” and “bad” animals.

Objectifying Animals to Showcase Human Qualities: *Jayasimha* and the Song

Jayasimha, the Kannada filmⁱⁱ, was produced in 1987. The director of the film is P. Vasu, a famous south Indian film director, and its protagonist is a forest officer acted by Vishnuvardhan, a well-known and popular Kannada actor. The film revolves around smuggling of animals from forest areas and their rescue by the forest officer. Coupled with this theme is the family drama in which an elephant’s sincerity to the officer’s family (wife and her kid) is put to test. After going through some arduous moments, the elephant ultimately proves its innocence and convinces the officer’s wife about its honesty. The wife, who had bad impression about the elephant as a potential threat to her kid, becomes convinced of the elephant’s innocence and integrity. Meanwhile the elephant acts as a sincere friend and a noble servant to the officer. It assists him ably to eliminate the immoral smugglers from the forest areas. Throughout the film the elephant acts as yet another character whose centrality is integral to the narrative of the film. It becomes the symbolic/mythical Gajendra who serves *Jayasimha*.

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The viewers watch the elephant in Jayasimha for the first time when he enters the forest with a Kannada song playing in the background. He is deputed to the forest area as forest range officer to punish and eliminate the smugglers. He enters the forest area in his jeep with a dressed monkey, and also the friend of the officer, sitting on top of the jeep and a parrot on the shoulders of the protagonist. These two creatures in the jeep are used in the song to introduce the officer as friendly, compassionate and harmless. His importance for the forest life is praised in the form of a song which is also the title songⁱⁱⁱ. While going through the forest to his office, suddenly, he hears an elephant's *Aranya Rodana* (wild cry). Alarmed by this, the officer alights off his jeep and starts running towards the direction from which the crying sound originated. On reaching the spot, he notices the elephant's leg is caught by a crocodile on the bank of a river in the forest and the elephant is helpless to escape from the jaws of it. It is trumpeting out of pain as its left leg is bleeding due to crocodile's attack. The officer shoots the crocodile with his rifle and rescues the elephant from imminent death. The song, which is stopped for a moment to focus on the officer's helping nature in protecting the animals in danger, continues after this scene and sings that the animals, trees and various other creatures in the forest henceforth do not have to fear anybody because they are safe in the hands of the new officer. While the song is on, the officer applies herbal leaves brought by his pet monkey to the wound of the elephant which comes near him limping and ties a cloth around the wound to stop bleeding. The elephant, out of gratitude, shows "miraculous" sensibility to the officer's courtesy and offers him flowers as a token of thanks (which reminds the viewers of a lotus offered by the mythical elephant to god Vishnu. See figure 1). The officer accepts the flowers with great love and affection. Subsequent scenes in film show the blossoming of friendship between the elephant and the officer.

Josephine Donovan rightly makes an observation about the employment of animals as metaphors in literature or in other modes of expression wherein human behavior and characters are highlighted. She points out, "In literature, one of the most common devices that exploit animal pain for aesthetic effect is the animal metaphor, or, more specifically, the animal "stand-in" or

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proxy, where the animal is used as an object upon which to project or act out human feelings. Using animal death and agony to dramatize, symbolize, or comment upon the emotional state of the human protagonists continues to be a standard fictional device” (2011: 206). His observations hold true in case of the present song in question too.

Undoubtedly the elephant-protection scene in the song is derivative of the myth of Gajendra Moksha. Similar to god Vishnu in the myth, Jayasimha, the modern day forest officer, assumes the role of protector of the weak and virtuous (the elephant) and punisher of the evil (crocodile)^{iv}. In both situations elephant is elevated to the pious status while crocodile is reduced to villainous role. Through the myth and the film song, both Vishnu and Jayasimha assume virtuous status. While Vishnu protects the elephant which prays to him for protection and becomes its liberator (protector of true devotees), Jayasimha clears the air of fear and anxiety among the animals despite the fact that his gun-shots scare other animals such as deer, bison and birds. They run helter-skelter in fear. But Jayasimha is unmindful of this because his sole intention is to protect the elephant from crocodile’s attack^v and discharge his duties sincerely. Protecting the elephant, in both cases, substantiates the inevitability of human intervention to set right “anomalies” in the natural world. Elephant becomes the mirror-object to reflect the “greatness” of both Vishnu and Jayasimha. In both cases elephant surrenders to the will of Vishnu and Jayasimha and becomes subservient to both.

Both god Vishnu of the Hindu myth and Jayasimha, who are expected to sustain and protect the animals without discrimination, create hierarchy of animals. While the villainous crocodile is shown deserving punishment for its predatory quality, the innocent elephant is liberated from the merciless clutches of the crocodile. Animals, in both cases, are attributed certain qualities so as to highlight human characters and moral responsibility in contrast to them. The moral responsibility of Jayasimha, born out of liberal humanism, fails to take into account the natural affairs in forests and imposes him on the animals as the legitimate arbitrator between animals.

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The inherited notions of animals, though kind to animals, ultimately prove to be selective and partial in the case of Jayasimha. It is his self-imposed kindness and moral responsibility which ultimately overshadow the realities of animal life. It highlights the socio-religious base of animal rights protection.

Notes

ⁱ Representations of animals are pre-modern too. The Buddhist, Hindu and Jaina sculptures and temples are the best examples for pre-modern/pre-colonial representation of animals.

ⁱⁱ The title of the film has implicit reference to Hindu mythological figure namely Ugra Narasimha (ferocious Narasimha, half human and half lion) who, in the disguise of half-human and half-lion, kills Hiranyakashyapa as the latter was against god Vishnu. South Indian Brahmins worship Ugra Narasimha as they believe him to be the incarnation of Vishnu. So the literal meaning of Jayasimha is 'triumphant lion'.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JvNXHJfsHg> as watched on 21st June, 2016.

^{iv} Elephant has a very pious status among the Hindu worshippers. It is the royal vehicle of Indra, the ruler of heaven. Ganesha's (a very popular deity in the Hindu pantheon), elephant head has accorded the animal its pious status. The Hindus across India, Nepal and Sri Lanka worship elephants. Crocodile is not worshipped much by the Hindus as it is widely understood to be cruel, ravenous, untamable and merciless while elephant is seen as sober, friendly and easily tamable.

^v Later on in the film he contradicts himself as he strongly advises the heroine (the future wife of Jayasimha) not to hunt animals in the forest as it is banned.

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