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Does Pluralism have a Future?

By: Janaki Nair

Cultural plurality cannot serve as a bulwark against the heady unifying power of majoritarianism buttressed by official political power. To defend democracy, we need to reacquaint people with the value of our plural cultural inheritance.

It is an unfortunate fact that much less is known of Karnataka's historical and linguistic riches than the arguably important place it now occupies as the one state in southern India that has succumbed to the communalised neo-nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

The brevity of the BJP-led government's existence (2020 to 2023) did nothing to curtail the breathtaking speed with which it cemented social changes and ushered in regressive legislation. For a state that had for too long worn its linguistic vitality and richness, an enviable antiquity, and astonishingly varied historical legacies (including architectural, religious and political legacies) rather lightly, the hypervisible assault on, indeed denial of, this pluralism has startled many. It served as a warning that cultural plurality and complex inheritances cannot serve as a bulwark against the heady unifying power of majoritarianism, especially when buttressed by official political power.

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Karnataka's quick and steep descent into an unforgiving and nearly intolerant culture over the last few decades and particularly in the last few years—has been a cause of deep concern to litterateurs, cultural activists, academics, and language enthusiasts alike. Many of them have addressed these developments with the urgency they deserve. UR Ananthamurthy's last work was *Hindutva Athava Hind Swaraj*, which laid out the two paths that now lie before us. It was no more than a vain hope. Devanoor Mahadeva wrote his *pustika*, *RSS: Aala Matthu Agala*, explaining the history of the RSS and the dangers the organisation posed to the achievements of the past 70 years. There was no mistaking the urgency of his tone.

In his new book, *Bahutva Karnataka*, Rahamath Tarikere recognises that the time for mere celebration of Karnataka's plurality has passed, and considers how can the dilemmas and predicaments be turned into opportunities. Out of the exhausted capital that pluralism has become, what is still worth saving? And how? Can pluralism be freshly invoked as a norm to be yoked to democratic practice? In this exploration, he joins many other critics in Karnataka, such as MM Kalburgi, M Chidanandamurthy, DR Nagaraj, Ashadevi, Vinaya Okkunda, or Mahadeva Shankanapura in doubling up as a historian. (One might even say that many important historical insights have been generated by literary critics in Karnataka). Tarikere's landmark *Karnatakada Sufigalu* has been unmatched for its investment in textual as well as field-based research and for uncovering the histories, but also the contemporary sources and sites, of Karnataka's legendary Sufi-Lingayat commingling.

Lessons from a Messy Past

Bahutva Karnataka begins, quite rightly, with a recap of all that the state can proudly lay claim to as part of its plural heritage. But this is no simple laundry list; it goes well beyond citing Basaveshwara. Thirteen chapters are set into a web of literary and other allusions that pay tribute to Kuvempu, Devanoor Mahadeva, Rajeev Taranath and BGL Swamy, but also the *Kavirajamarga*, tattvapada 'writers' such as Muppina Shadakshari, and Shishunala Shariff. With and through them, he ranges over language, nature, territory, political practice, song, literature, religions, etc. Tarikere literally leaves no stone unturned in turning this act of recall into a strident call to protecting the regional foundations on which this nation was built. India is indeed, as historian Madhavan Palat (2022: 162, 128-168) has described it, no less than a "nation of nations [...] This nation of nations is unique in the world as the largest and so far the most successful example of a nationalism integrating a host of other nationalisms. But its significance has been obscured for a number of good reasons".

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Citing Kuvempu, Tarikere reasserts that the region is vital to the nation, and the two need not be in conflict or be contradictory to each other. He quotes Kuvempu, “I belong to the Karnataka state; my linguistic identity is Kannada, and in the cultural and national senses, I am Indian. My *karnatakatwa* and my *bharatiyatwa* are never in contradiction”. Kuvempu’s song, written at the tender age of 24, extols the rich plurality of geographies, histories and peoples that have been knitted into the Kannada nation; its most popular line, sung in schools everyday as the *naada geethe* describes Karnataka as “*sarva janangada shantiya thota*”(the peaceful garden in which all people coexist). Karnataka has been, as another poet has it, “a field on which cows of varied faiths have [peacefully] grazed”.

That said, Tarikere does not fight shy of recalling, too, the fierce inter- and intra-faith struggles for which there is ample literary and sculptural evidence. Shia-Sunni, Shaivite-Vaishnavite, Vaishnavite-Jain, Lingayat-Jain—which sect, which period of Karnataka’s past, has been exempt from conflict? How then do we get back to the garden of peaceful coexistence?

Here too, the past is bristling with ideas and insights. There are unique ways in which we might interpret, for instance, the Karnataka inscription of 1368 at Shravanabelgola, when in the time of Bukkaraya I (reigned 1356–1377) it said “there is no difference between Jain and Vaishnava faiths”. As Tarikere points it, this was not a call for uniformity of belief or practice. It was a pragmatic appeal, in a time of crisis or confrontation, that set aside practice and advised coexistence as the ground for continued good governance. This landscape of religious belief, of exchange, conflicts, but equally, creative resolutions and tolerance too, stands challenged by the bigotry of our times.

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For *Bahutva Karnataka*, difference itself is not plurality. Indeed not all difference is positive, as we know from the multiple hierarchies, of caste, gender, race, ethnicity, that we are committed to erasing. Plurality can become hierarchised difference. For instance, despite a long commitment to ‘multiculturalism’, race relations in the United States have been far from equalised. And we are painfully aware of our own long, strenuous and often ineffectual efforts at effacing caste difference.

Tarikere’s dialectical approach, importantly, takes us to the characteristics of *bahutva*: the link between different, even discrepant, entities, and the nature of these links, leading to something new. The result is not uniformity, but *ekatva*(without the erasure of difference). *Bahutva* itself is not fixed from its origins in practice; it changes, and is shaped according to circumstances, as the book shows throughout. Tarikere’s approach to, and respect for, the beliefs and faiths of the Kannada people allows him to build up a robust respect for secular ideals, even if they are unevenly inflected in different traditions.

Nearly all of Tarikere’s examples are taken from the great male writers, artists, of course kings and reformers, activists, religious saints and leaders. Woman appear neither as presence nor as sign, although there is a detailed discussion of the language as female (sister, mother) while the supplicants are usually male. Why is this a troubling absence in a book like this? Can any effort that hopes to pave the way to a better future, as this book surely does, succeed by leaving out half of the Kannada people?

Tarikere, like his male literary cohorts, the regular political parties, even organisations such as the DSS, the Karnataka Rakshana Vedike, etc take women’s participation in the worlds of meaning-making, or political action, indeed in society itself, for granted. Yet the overwhelming feature of contemporary neo-nationalism, as it manifests in the activities of groups like Sri Rama Sene, the Bajrang Dal and so on, is their muscular masculinity.

Which cultural critic can afford to ignore the hypervisible masculinity, perhaps even misogyny, that stalks every street corner (on flexboards), every public meeting, every association? Has the Kannada literary world not thought it necessary to take on board the work— political, literary, and beyond— of people like Du Saraswati, Vinaya Okkunda, Vijaya Dabbe, among others? This is no small oversight given the ambitions of this book. Such an ‘exclusion’ in an effort that emphasises inclusion, is inexcusable.

Revaluing Cultural Inheritances

For those who responded to the empowering calls to unity of the workers’ movements, of feminism, of linguistic state formations, or of the Dalit movement, through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the new imperative to ‘unite’ under the neo-nation is a spectre, a threat. As Rabindranath Tagore said in his critique of nationalism, the nation (even the regional nation) cannot be seen as an inheritance, it has to be created for itself, continuously built anew in order to avoid exclusiveness and isolation. This calls for resistance to the stifling *kendrikarana* that is being inflicted on us, while also building hope.

Bahutva Karnataka is no less than an effort at ending the growing ‘cultural illiteracy’ of our people, to urgently foster ways of valuing this rich inheritance, if our democracy is to remain, and become more meaningful.

The Kannada language has historically not witnessed the ‘purification’ movements of the neighbouring Tamil region. Only a small handful of writers emphasised the need for this linguistic ‘shudhikarana’. Other languages, and language speakers have been generously accommodated in Kannada’s fold, right up to the present day. This is true of its musical traditions too—a short lecture by Rajeev Taranath on his 90th birthday in 2022 pointed out the unique co-existence of Hindustani and Carnatic musical traditions in that cusp region of Hubli-Dharwad, unmatched in any other part of India. Ameer Bai and Gohar Bai sang in Kannada, Marathi, Hindi, and Gujarati. In addition to the many languages that have enriched this musical tradition is its secularism, more marked of course in the Hindustani than in the Carnatic tradition.

Yet, there has never been in Karnataka, especially in the modern period, a strenuous effort to build an appreciative and supportive public through a library movement, as happened in the neighbouring Andhra and Malayalam regions. This weakness has meant that the literary riches have remained the preserve of a smaller, one might even say less influential group. It took the cinepolitics of Rajkumar to ensure a place for Kannada in the public realm (Prasad, 2013).

Viewed against this backdrop, *Bahutva Karnataka* is no less than an effort at ending the growing ‘cultural illiteracy’ of our people, to urgently foster ways of valuing this rich inheritance, if our democracy is to remain, and become more meaningful. Tarikere’s book is far too complex to be seen as a manifesto for action. But it may not be surprising that he turns to ‘we the people of India’ in his last, all too brief, chapter. It acknowledges the price that many writers and thinkers have already paid, not just living in the shadow of the fear that stalks the state, especially following the brutal murders of Gowri Lankesh and MM Kalaburgi, but the multiple ways in which writers and thinkers are silenced or harassed—or indeed, censor themselves. But it also nurtures the hope of another future, one that can draw from the deep wellsprings of pluralism in this one region.

Janaki Nair retired from the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, in 2020. She now lives and teaches in Bengaluru.

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