

A Study of the Inconsistency in Indian Thinking in Select Texts of Dakshin Kannada Literature

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Abstract:

The Dakshin Kannada District in Karnataka is an amalgamation of cultures and communities, each with its own mythology and narratives. Its literature, however, has been largely overlooked. This paper seeks to examine three major narrative texts of Dakshin Kannada Literature, each dealing with the story of a different community– Shivaram Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* (Dalit community), Gopalakrishna Pai's *Swapna Saraswatha* (*Gand Saraswat* Brahmin community), and D.K Chawta's *Mittabail Yamunakka: A Tale of a Landlord's Household* (Bunt community), and analyze them in the light of A.K Ramanujan's seminal Cultural Essay "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?" (1990). The selected texts of Dakshin Kannada Literature will be read to determine to what extent they demonstrate Ramanujan's concept of Indian inconsistency. Moreover, the history of these communities is analyzed to determine whether they have singular, linear, and consistent narratives.

Introduction

In his "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?", A.K Ramanujan explains what he considers to be several hallmarks of the Indian way of thinking. One of these features is what he calls "Inconsistency". It is the ability to resist being tied down to a certain identity to exercise the benefits of all ways of thinking. Ramanujan provides the example of his own father, who was both a mathematician and an astrologer simultaneously. He used to discuss astrology with local astrologers, and at the same time entertain theories of British mathematicians who would visit him. As a young man, Ramanujan could not understand how his father could hold such contradictory ideas in his mind simultaneously (42-44).

Ramanujan analyses the Indian way of thinking through his analysis of literature. From the *Manusmriti* to old Tamil poetry, he diversifies his examples. Despite this, it is difficult to pinpoint

whether there is a distinctively Indian way of thinking. He admits this reality in the essay itself (41). It is impossible to assign a certain mindset or mentality to a country with so many distinct languages and communities. It is possible, however, to consider a smaller geographic area and pick a finite number of communities from the region for analysis. And like Ramanujan, it is possible for us to analyze their literature.

The literature of a community could mean many things. It could mean that a particular community is the subject of a work, or that its author belongs to the community, or both. In any case, literature has a context, and the work tells us as much about the context as the context says about the work. This also applies when the context is a community. Before getting into whether or not the characters in these works are inconsistent, it is hence important to analyze the same for the communities they represent.

Every community has an inconsistent narrative. The communities themselves pick and choose a version of history that portrays their ancestors in the best light. These narratives, however, are not accepted by outsiders, resulting in inconsistencies. Consider the historical narratives of the GSB, *Bunts*, and Dalits of Dakshin Kannada.

The GSBs migrated to Dakshin Kannada following the Portuguese takeover of Goa. They consider themselves to be descended from parts of Northern India. GSB stands for *Gaud Saraswat* Brahmin, pointing to the *Gaud* Brahmins who lived near the mythical river Saraswathi. This narrative is rarely accepted outside GSB circles. According to Alexander Henn, "modern scholars have questioned the myth of the northern descent" (Henn 87). Instead, they trace the origin of the community to local priests who later obtained Brahminhood.

While the GSBs proudly claim northern descent, the *Bunt* community takes pride in claiming to be the original inhabitants of Dakshin Kannada. This is despite several theories of them being of Harappan origin. Other theories include an Aryan, Spartan, and even Mediterranean link. Despite these theories, the *Bunts* consider themselves to be one of the original inhabitants of *Tulu Nadu* (the Tulu-speaking regions of Dakshin Kannada, including the city of Mangalore) (Shetty). Like the GSBs, there is no singular, linear narrative to their story.

Both these communities have had sufficient time to pick and choose their narratives. This is unlike the Dalits of the region, who were considered to be below the system for centuries. The Dalits

were not allowed to craft their own narratives. Hence, for a long time, the narratives about them had consistency due to their externally imposed subaltern status.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the first Dalit to craft a historical narrative for his community. In his book *Who Were the Shudras?* he comes up with a theory for the Dalit origin. According to him, the Dalits were originally upper-caste kings, whose royal status fell after a conflict between Buddhism and Brahminism. Ambedkar's narrative has been criticized as merely a desperate attempt to prove Shudras were of high caste ancestry (Sharma 5). Nonetheless, for the first time, the Dalits have a narrative of their own creation, which could be open to disagreements and hence inconsistency.

Today, all three communities have enough narratives about their origins that contradict each other. Instead of an objective history, what we have are inconsistent narratives. Does this historical inconsistency translate into their literature in the form of inconsistent characters? If so, is the nature of inconsistency the same in all three?

The consistent Dalit

Shivaram Karanth wrote *Chomana Dudi* in 1933. Originally written in Kannada and translated into English in 1978, it tells the story of Choma and his family, who are Dalit bonded-labourers working for the Brahmin landlord Sankappayya. Choma's dream is to have land of his own, and he expresses his frustrations of not being able to attain it by constantly playing his drum. His family consists of his four sons and his daughter, Belli.

Belli falls for Manvela, the estate owner's writer. She is also raped by the estate owner in exchange for writing off a debt in Choma's name. Belli does not even have a means of expression. She is truly a subaltern, who is a "historically muted subject" (Spivak 91). The estate owner's treatment of Belli is indicative of how the upper caste men used to view Dalit women, as canvases to paint upon according to their desires, particularly sexual desires. In the novel, Christianity is offered to Choma as a way out of his subaltern existence. But he rejects it.

Choma has a means of expression. He constantly plays his drum to release an excess of emotions. In the end, he shuts himself up in his house, playing the drum till he dies. Choma's drum can be compared to the drum used by Oskar in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*. Just as Choma uses his drum to express his frustrations with the caste system, Oskar uses his to express his hatred for the Nazis. Oskar needs the drum at all times. If it is taken away, he becomes violent to get it back, even screaming

loud enough to shatter glass when his only medium of expression is taken away from him. Choma also demonstrates destructive tendencies while not playing the drum, as evident from his frequent drunkenness.

Choma lacks consistency. Inconsistency occurs only when one is presented with options to choose. But Choma has no choice beyond his animal-like existence. Choma uses the drum to communicate a singular emotion -sorrow. A communication style with such a consistent purpose is reflective of Charles. F. Hockett's view of animal communication:

An analog computer is often beautifully adapted for a narrow function and worthless for anything else. Just so, bees can talk about nectar and hive-sites; human beings can talk about anything. (Hockett 35)

At a point in the novel, Christianity is offered to Choma as a solution. The church agrees to grant him his dream – a piece of land under his own ownership. But Choma rejects the offer and maintains his allegiance to the *Daiva* called *Panjurli*. Like Ramanujan's father, who was an astrologer and mathematician at the same time, Choma could have embraced Christianity while still praying to *Panjurli* in his privacy. But he finds the thought of such inconsistency revolting. Choma should either accept the socially imposed consistency of his life or bring about inconsistency through his own efforts. He does neither of these.

Guruva, one of Choma's sons, accepts Christianity. This is, however, due to his love for Mary, a Christian girl, and not a result of his love for Christ. We get no indication that he remains consistent with his Dalit view of life. He does not follow *Panjurli* and Christ simultaneously, and hence does not succumb to inconsistency. Hence, the major characters in *Chomana Dudi* refuse to accept inconsistency, even when the opportunity arises.

The author Shivaram Karanth is a Brahmin. Yet he depicts the condition of the poor and the downtrodden in his works. Apart from *Chomana Dudi*, works such as *Nirbhagya Janma* and *Sooleya Samsara* show such sympathies. Through such works, Karanth breaks out of what Ramanujan calls the "context-dependent" thinking that is another hallmark of the Indian mindset (Ramanujan 46).

According to the roles delegated in the *Manusmriti*, it is in no way a Brahmin's duty to look into the hardships of any of the castes below him, let alone the Dalits. Therefore, Karanth himself shows inconsistency by remaining a Brahmin, yet taking an interest in describing the condition of the Dalits.

Despite Karanth's good intentions, his portrayal of the Dalit landscape is not an accurate portrayal. Choma's character lacks the honesty and realism cultivated through lived experience, as seen in works such as Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*. In Limbale's portrayal, Dalit men became thieves and women became prostitutes due to their circumstances. Choma's loyalty to his principles is hence the exception of the Dalit experience, not the rule.

***Swapna Saraswatha* and the inconsistent Brahmin**

Swapna Saraswatha is a 2009 Tulu novel by Gopalakrishna Pai, translated into English in 2017. It is a partly fictionalized account of the migration of the GSB community to Dakshin Kannada, Kerala, and other southern regions after the Portuguese takeover of Goa. It is a story spanning over multiple generations and characters and is a product of nearly twenty years of research on the part of its author, combining history and myth in strategic ways to provide instances of magical realism.

Narasappayya is the first major character in the novel. He admires the administrative efficiency of the Portuguese, particularly that of Alphonso, who managed to take over his lands. He reminds one of Olunde from Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, who shows admiration for the white man's ability to survive any situation. Both characters are not rewarded for their appreciation, and tragedy is inflicted on both by the coloniser. But as Olunde says, the coloniser should allow others to "survive in their own way" (Soyinka 53), which the Portuguese in the novel do not do. They attempt to convert the GSBs to Christianity. Narasappayya detests this mindset, that they should obey these *Firangis*, who are mere guests to a land the GSBs have inhabited for centuries. Narasappayya shows inconsistency in his thinking by both detesting and admiring the colonizer simultaneously.

In another instance, we come across Malappayya, who is infuriated by the presence of Christian converts at a wedding. This is hypocrisy on his part, as the GSBs in the novel have a temple built in the community of the lower castes, despite the untouchability of the time.

Following the wedding incident, Budhu, Malappayya's servant, accepts Christianity under the name of Joa de Costa. He is provided with clothes and other things considered a luxury for his caste. Malappayya ridicules the lower castes, stating that they fall for the "trivial gifts" offered by the *Firangis*. Despite the improvement in his circumstances, Budhu continues to remain Malappayya's servant. Malappayya and his community engage in inconsistency while detesting it in the lower castes.

***Mittabail Yamunakka* and the androgynous Indian ideal**

The slant towards inconsistency is apparent in D.K Chawta's 2005 Tulu novel *Mittabail Yamunakka*, translated into English in 2017. This is a work about the *Bunt* community in Dakshin Kannada, and comprises of the story of three generations divided into two parts. In the first part, we come across brothers Manjanalva and Beerana Bunta. The *bunts* are Kshatriyas, warriors who are supposed to protect their community. Manjanalva, however, betrays his community to the British. Instead of protecting his land and his people, Manjanalva contributes to their destruction. It even results in his brother Beerana being hung to death for assisting the freedom fighters. The second part of the novel is set in modern times. Here we meet Mittabail Yamunakka, the titular character, who is a landlady. We also come across another interesting character called Manku Rai. He desires to obtain Yamunakka's land. For this purpose, Rai presents a man in front of Yamunakka, claiming that he is possessed by the *Daiva*. He forces Yamunakka to give him the land so that the *Daiva* is satisfied. Unlike Choma, Manku Rai shows no reluctance in using the *Daiva* as a tool. Towards the end of the book, a ruling is made regarding land ownership. The ownership of land has been lawfully shifted from the true owners to the laborers of the land. This drives Yamunakka furious. She goes onto her land with a gun and kills every single person working it. Through her violence, Yamunakka violates what it means to be Kshatriya.

It is bravery that is the virtue of the Kshatriya. There is nothing brave about Yamunakka's actions. Moreover, she violates several rules for Kshatriya-hood, which are laid out in the *Ramayana* and the *Manusmriti*.

According to Nagendra Singh, Manu divulges thus:

“One who surrenders or is without arms or is sleeping or is naked, or with hair untied (i.e., unprepared) or is an on-looker (non-combatant) must never be killed,” irrespective of whether the opponent was a believer or Arya or a Yavana (alien non-believer) or whether he was fighting a just war or not (32).

Violating Kshatriya-hood for her own selfish ends while remaining a Kshatriya makes Yamunakka an inconsistent character.

Kshatriya Dharma is not the Indian ideal. Ashis Nandy, in his *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, states that colonial power established the idea that the hyper-masculine Kshatriya mindset is the mindset of India as a whole. Instead of the hyper-masculine portrayal, Nandy

theorizes that the Indian mindset is androgynous. This solidifies Ramanujan's claim of Indian inconsistency, as androgyny is itself inconsistent; being man and woman simultaneously.

Following Yamunakka's act of violence, her brother refuses ownership of the land and chooses the path of Gandhi, whom Nandy regards as the epitome of the androgynous Indian man. The land becomes without an heir. The path of Gandhi is one of non-violence, which is at odds with the *Bunt* way of life rooted in battle, wealth, and ownership. Hence, he is a largely hybrid character, supporting Ramanujan's "inconsistency", and Nandy's concept of the androgynous Indian man.

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