

Rajkumar and Kannada Nationalism

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K S DAKSHINA MURTHY

Kannada film star Rajkumar died, and Bangalore convulsed. Violently. India's IT capital, and the jewel in the country's software crown, displayed another face, this one more horrific and hard to understand. The city came to a standstill and the repercussions rumbled around the world, wherever companies depended on the city for their business processes in real time. One question that foreigners and outsiders repeatedly asked: all this for a mere actor?

On the surface, yes, Rajkumar was just an actor – dominating the Kannada film industry for five decades. As people go, he was hardly the kind of personality who could be termed leader material. Rajkumar was a shy, self-effacing figure who appeared to be most at ease when left alone in his privacy. On innumerable occasions, he expressed surprise at the attention he attracted and the street violence triggered off in his name – the same surprise that many others expressed in the aftermath of his death.

Rajkumar may not have realised it. He had, over the years, emerged as a mascot for a nascent Kannada nationalism that never really blossomed into a movement. The start of his career coincided with the birth of Karnataka in 1956, and his 205 films since then traced and reflected the growing sense of the emerging Kannada identity.

Cultural Icon

In the absence of a dedicated political movement for the cause of Kannada and local culture, Rajkumar came to symbolise the hope and angst of a large section of Kannadigas. Their sense of achievement and failures were intertwined with the Kannada film box office and Rajkumar metamorphosed into a cultural icon, single-handedly appearing to champion the cause of Kannada.

The post-1956 period saw the consolidation of the Tamil nationalist movement

led by the Dravida Kazhagam leader in neighbouring Tamil Nadu in which the film fraternity played a pivotal role. And, M G Ramachandran emerged as its torch-bearer. Though there were no competing interests, those with nationalistic aspirations in Karnataka, responded by projecting Rajkumar as their leader.

While MGR was the foremost representative of a vibrant, socially-transforming Tamil resurgence, Rajkumar turned out to be the face of the Kannadiga nationalist bereft of a large scale grassroots movement.

In Andhra Pradesh, while there was no Tamil Nadu-like nationalist movement, the historical differences between the Telangana region and the Andhras as well as the friction between Telugu and the erstwhile Nizam-promoted Urdu language gave rise to the Telugu Desam. For "Andhra pride", as its key architect, film star N T Rama Rao used to put it.

NTR managed to harness the alienation of the Telugus to emerge as their spokesman and win mass support, leveraging it to become chief minister of Andhra Pradesh.

Karnataka, however, turned out to be different. Unlike Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, its cosmopolitan structure proved an obstacle for unifying Kannada nationalistic sentiments. Along with Kannadigas, the state also has sizeable sections of Konkani, Tulu and Kodava-speaking populations not to mention the domination of Marathi and Hindi in the northern parts of the state.

Only the Old Mysore region in the south and the central areas of the state could be said to be Kannada-dominant. However, it was not powerful enough to carry the entire state with it. Over the years, no single force could unify the deep-rooted subcultural differences within the state and bring under one umbrella a movement that could reflect the aspirations of the local people cutting across linguistic lines.

In the early 1980s the Gokak movement for the primacy of the local language in education and administration, so called after a report on the promotion of Kannada by the educationist V K Gokak, came closest to an all-encompassing social upsurge by nationalistic elements in the state.

Litterateurs and the intelligentsia from north and south Karnataka joined hands for the primacy of Kannada. Rajkumar who until then had been merely a superstar, for the first time, came out into the public arena providing a massive boost to the movement. At this point, there was intense discussion, debate and speculation over whether Rajkumar would take up the leadership mantle and make the predictable shift from cinema to politics.

It seemed his private persona was in conflict with his public image. For months, nay a few years, the speculation continued until he eventually set it at rest by reaffirming his lack of interest in politics.

A Symbol for Kannada Linguistic Aspirations

The Gokak movement had some success, but belied its initial promise of turning into an all-encompassing social movement. Among the several causes for this was the absence of a socio-economic agenda. The focus, firmly and solely fixed on language, did not move beyond that.

A few tentative attempts were made at testing the waters to check whether Rajkumar's persona could win votes at the hustings like an assembly election in Malleswaram in the mid-1980s. But the candidate backed by his group fared badly.

However, a consequence of the Gokak movement and Rajkumar's public backing of it lifted him from a mere actor into a symbol for Kannada linguistic aspirations and over the years, into its cultural spokesman. In the post-Gokak period until his death, his public posturing was limited to backing the Kannada film industry. In the process he kept alive his image as the representative of the Kannada language.

He reaffirmed his personal commitment to Kannada by turning down offers to act in any other language. And, in another show of loyalty, shifted his base from Chennai to Bangalore at the height of the Cauvery dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in the late 1980s.

Under his influence, the Kannada film industry also banned dubbing and remakes from other language films for several years. Only recently the rule has been relaxed.

As for Kannada nationalistic aspirations, they never really took off, albeit in minor

forms represented by individuals like Vatal Nagaraj of the Kannada Chaluvaligars (Kannada movement), Chidananda Murthy and bodies like the Kannada Rakshana Vedike (Kannada protection forum) which have more often than not come to be associated with narrow, chauvinistic agendas. Unsurprisingly, they haven't made much headway.

Rajkumar's fans' association (Rajkumar Abhimanigala Sangha) too was left rudderless in the absence of a broader agenda. The fans were relegated to merely assembling and showing their prowess on the streets and at meetings in which their leader participated or where he was the subject, like the opening of films in which "Raj" was the hero. No doubt there were innumerable admirers and acolytes from all classes, but the fans in the Sangha were a specific congregation of those from the economically less-privileged sections with considerable bottled up anger at being marginalised.

Absence of a Movement

If Kannada nationalistic aspirations had taken root and turned into a major movement, the fans would have transformed into its cadre. But in the absence of such a movement, Rajkumar himself as well as the narrow causes he espoused became their war cry. The fans' active role in the early 1990s agitation over the Cauvery interim award and later the street protests against his kidnap by the brigand Veerappan were two clear examples of this mindset.

If one goes through the several interviews of Rajkumar in recent years, it is clear he never saw himself as a leader who could take forward the ideals of the Kannada nationalists. He merely expressed his love for the language and its culture but refused to recognise his own transcendence as a leader who could influence Karnataka's politics in a big way. His followers, however, still retained some optimism that he would one day step out of his homestead into the dust and grime of the politico-public space. Their hopes were in vain.

Rajkumar's death seems to have dealt a final blow to any hopes of the local nationalists emerging as an independent political force. With their mascot gone, the violence and mayhem witnessed on the days of his death and burial could be interpreted as a final show of protest, defiance and expression of frustration at the loss of a dream. **EPW**

Email: daxshin@gmail.com