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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Depicting Indigenous Culture,  
Mythology and Tribal Issues through  
Cinema: A Case Study of 'Kantara - The  
Legend'**

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**Abstract**

Tribals are Indigenous people who live inside forests and have a strong claim on the available natural resources and spaces of the forests. There is a community dependence on these available natural resources. The tribals, at times, come in conflict with the administration in the name of conservation. Drives to conserve the ecosystem often mean loss of rights of land, forced evictions and displacements of the tribal population. According to a UN report on 'Conservation and the rights of indigenous peoples' published in January 2019, there is often an arbitrary threat on the indigenous communities for resettlement or displacement.' It has been observed that even if the people are given resettlement projects, their traditions and customs are sometimes not factored in. Thus hindering them from following their traditional ways of living. According to govt

reports (Census, 2011), 8.9% of India's total population is tribal population. It is important for a country like India, with a rich cultural background and very specific cultural practices, to knit tradition and conservation ideas together (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2022). Cinema has the power to affect our imagination and shape our consciousness. Eco-cinema plays an important role in raising environmental consciousness among people. The research paper is a case study of the movie, 'Kantara' and how it successfully balances the ideas of Depiction of Indigenous Culture, Mythology, & Tribal Issues through cinema. The film explores social conflicts and environmental consciousness in the backdrop of Indian mythology by depicting stories of demigods Panjurli and Guliga. The traditional practices and rituals of the Kambala and BhuthKola festivals have been showcased. The research paper analyses the different aspects of the movie Kantara from the perspective of indigenous culture, mythology, traditional practices, and tribal issues.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Culture, Mythology, Indian Cinema, Eco cinema

## Introduction

A noticeable number of tribal populations significantly exemplifies India's cultural diversity. As of the 2011 Census, the tribal population comprised 8.9% of the country's population. These communities live in harmony with Nature in their natural surroundings. They have their own cultural identity and traditions, which add to India's rich traditional history. Tribal populations in India have also significantly contributed to India's Freedom struggle. Birsa Munda's birth anniversary on November 15 has been recognized as Janjatiya Gaurav Divas (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2024). Tribal population is found with a few significant characteristics. They

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inhibit their indigenous land, mostly forest; they stay away from mainstream regions of the human population in cities, villages and urban areas. Their sustenance depends a lot on their natural surroundings and their natural ecosystem. They practice traditional agriculture in the forest, hunting and collecting forest materials for their livelihood.

Due to staying away from the mainstream human population, they are often challenged with problems of lack of access to quality resources, whether it be education, healthcare or others. The conflict between forest dwellers and uniformed officials has been the central plot for many films across the globe. The portrayal of conflict usually arises from the basic right to existence of the forest-dwelling community, which has been in a set-up linked to their core existence for centuries. The conflict comes when there is a government or multinational profit-making entity that tries to usurp the forest resources for their benefit, vanquishing the indigenous tribal population and removing them from their land. Films like Avatar have brilliantly explored these storylines in many different ways. An Indian Film that became a sensation in 2022, becoming one of the highest-grossing year's highest-grossing films, was 'Kantara the Legend'. The film not only succeeded in creating a pan-Indian presence but also brought out the Indigenous flavours and problems of Tribal Communities in the Western Ghats without manipulating the traditional practices for the sake of commercial cinema. Conflict between forest officials and tribal communities is not a recent phenomenon. The Indian Forest Act of 1878 is an interesting study area as it tried to propagate British interests by curbing the rights of the indigenous tribals who inhabited these forest villages.

To foster economic gains for the contemporary British company, the basic rights of tribals, like grazing and agriculture, were deemed damaging to the forests. Multiple restrictions were put in. The same forest that was once a lap of mother nature, nourishing and cultivating the indigenous population, became the site of oppression and suppression for the tribals. Cases of the uprising have been noted in several areas like Bastar, Guden Rampa, Chotanagpur, Midnapur, Adilabad and more (*The Forest Act of 1878*, 2023). The Recognition of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 is a step in the right direction as it was formulated to counter the injustice done to indigenous forest-residing communities. It was also implemented to ensure that 'food security', 'land tenure' and 'livelihood' can be ensured for the indigenous Scheduled Tribes of

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forests. The government has attempted to strike a balance between the rights of individuals and the urgency to ensure the conservation of biodiversity needs of the country (*Forest Rights Act*, n.d). The conflict between the tribal population and forest officials is far from over in India. For example, Telangana has seen several conflicts and 'violent clashes' between tribal villagers and forest officials since 2019 (Sadam, 2021).

Films play a significant role in telling stories of repression and oppression. They are also crucial in projecting communities' rituals, customs, and beliefs. Through this depiction, the films create mass awareness and popularise the age-old traditions in a particular part of the country. When the subject of people residing inside the forest comes up, the issue of protecting indigenous culture and the human rights of the tribal people takes centre stage. Human-nature duality thus becomes a subject for filmmakers to explore on the canvas (Pai, 2018). The Kannada film *Kantara* is based on the background of a special folk ritual practice of Bhuthkola and the worship of local demigods and deities of the region. The worship of the local deity or Daiva forms the plot and eventually leads to a series of incidents. In the context of the film *Kantara*, these local deities being referred to are Panjurli and Guliga. The belief and practice is that on the day of the festival, the deity descends in the body of the performer, who is generally a spiritual special and chosen one from the same community. The Bhutkola performer performs many rituals during this festival, thus becoming the medium for these deities to interact with the common people. During these interactions, the deities answer the people's questions and solve their problems (Prabhakar & Patil, 2023). With the rapid influence of different foreign cultures in India, there is a need to conserve the indigenous cultures of India. There is a growing need to bring the 'Traditional Cultural Expression' of the communities into the mainstream so that they may be conserved and popularised. At times, the question points to whether the indigenous communities need 'promotion' or 'protection' because the traditional practices of forests being brought to the mainstream also risk dilution and adulteration to suit urban needs and the commercialization of cinema (Goyal & Shah, 2024).

The research paper is a case study of the movie *Kantara—The Legend*. The main objective is to analyze the film's portrayal in the context of the conflicts, problems, and sociocultural myths and beliefs of the indigenous tribal people of the region.

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## **Review of Literature: Influence of narrative cinema, eco-cinema and environmental films**

In his work, Scott Macdonald describes 'Eco cinema' as a genre of filmmaking that uses available technology to generate a message of conserving Nature and the natural world around us. Scott describes movies as a distraction that the common mass has in the mundane affairs of the day and the role of 'Eco cinema' as that of being an alternative to media spectatorship by providing a respite to consumerism through the use of Nature in the shots and story (Macdonald, 2004). David Ingram's work, 'The Aesthetics and Ethics of eco-film Criticism', says that one of the major aims of eco-film criticism is to create better awareness and understanding of the issues of the environment. His work questions if a particular genre of filmmaking can be more effective in bringing forth issues of the environment and its conservation in the public domain. He uses Greg Smith, a cognitivist theorist's work on the 'associative model', to argue that in the case of a narrative film, the viewer aligns his emotional thinking with the lead or protagonist's journey and goal. His work also highlights that eco-cinema creates better awareness among people with more ecological sensibility through its conceptual content. Considering audience predisposition and how these films act as a starting point for sensibility and awareness of the environment are discussed in detail (Ingram, 2013). A narrative film always tells a story that might be fictional, with a cause-and-effect form of storytelling formation for the audience watching the film. Through actors, high-budget art direction and other production techniques, a narrative film can build an environment that influences the audience's minds (DeGuzman, 2022). When narrative cinema focuses on environmental subjects, it can draw the audience's attention to important matters such as the environment, conservation, and other social issues. Even environmental ethics play a dominant role in films that portray the relationship between man and Nature. Bahk's research work published in 2010 shows that people who watched a narrative film or a feature film on an issue were better aware and more favourable towards the issue than those who did not watch the film. His work reveals that the perceived realism of films is an important factor in shaping the audience's attitude towards a subject matter (Bahk, 2010).

## **Methodology**

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A case study of the film Kantara has been done. The central theme, different events of consequence shown in the film, important dialogues, cultural events, and identities shown in the film have been discussed in detail and analyzed for the research paper.

### **Analyzing the film in the context of Identifying Cultural Identities, Conflict and Tribal Issues**

The movie begins in the backdrop of 1847. The timeframe is as significant as before the Forest Act's introduction. There was a king whose empire stretched from Moodanagudda to Paduvana Sea. He was blessed with all the riches and a beautiful family. They had everything needed for a happy life. But it was unconditional happiness that was missing from the King's life. Soothsayers suggested that he had everything but lacked a father's guidance and a mother's unconditional love. To find that, he must go on a quest or travel alone in search of inner peace. The King travelled to many holy lands and met many holy saints but could not find the peace he sought. Feeling that he would not find the peace he was seeking, he moved inside a forest. As he entered the forest, he was met with the sound of anklets. The serenity of the forest, rain, and the jingle of the anklet reminded him of the unconditional love and guidance he sought while in the 'samsara' or family. The King found peace, devotion and love in a demigod inside the forest. He renounced his weapons and folded his hands in prayer. He met with the tribals who inhabited the forest. He folded his hands and seemed to take their Demigod with him in exchange for anything they wanted. The Demigod he sought to take along with him was Panjurli. In this instance, Panjurli appeared possessed and asked the King what he could offer the tribals if he came with him. Panjurli asked the King to give the forest land to the tribals. He even warned the King that should he ever fail the villagers by breaking his promise, he would be a victim of the 'Rudra-rup' demigod Guliga. There was an amicable barter or exchange between the King and the tribals. There was no conflict between the Landlord or King and the villagers then.

The movie then cuts to 1970, post-independence India. There is a mention of the conflict between Landlord and tribals. The tribals are discussing that the Landlord is planning to seek back their land, considering the commercial value of the property. The film introduces the

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audience to Bhuthkola, the tribal festival. We can see that there is an evil landlord devoid of morality or respect for the culture or heritage of the land. He is mean and money-minded and only looks at the forest land as a source of wealth creation and plundering. He insults the custom of Bhuththkola as any random performing art. The festival is initiated with its traditions and customs. The film uses a song to tell the folklore of Varaha, the Avatar of Lord Vishnu, who assumes the incarnation of a wild boar. Varaha is the third Avatar of Lord Vishnu in Dashavatara.

The first conflict is shown on the occasion of Bhuthkola when the Landlord asks Panjurli to return the land of the forest to him as it does not belong to the tribals. The Landlord threatens to take the matter to court to take back the land occupied by the villagers. There is insult and humiliation of the Demigod Panjurli as the Landlord questions the very existence of the Demigod. Following the conflict, the demigod present in the performer disappears into the forest, and we are introduced to the lead, protagonist Shiva. Once again, this refers to the Hindu God, one of the Tridevs between Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva. The film cuts from 1970 to current times. Kambala festival is taking place in the village.

The buffalo race is important in setting up things for the characters. The first sign of a probable conflict between the then-landlord and the villagers is initiated here. The winning buffaloes of a villager, Shiva, are cunningly put to second position to make the Landlord win by an intermediary. A fight breaks out. Shiva's intrinsic personality opposes all kinds of wrongs, even if it means challenging the central power system. A medieval-style fight breaks out in the muddy field. In this fight, Shiva's call to fight is depicted with the word 'wooooooooh' and is reminiscent of the cries of the man possessed by the spirit of Panjurli at the start of the movie and the Bhoothkola scene earlier. Shiva is seen as a man of great physical strength, yet a gentle giant ready to bow down before the Landlord. He even lovingly takes a beating from his mother, who scolds her for fighting in public. He is naïve and says, 'The landlord loves them a lot'. He fails to look through Kaliyug's cunningness. He possesses Mahadev's simplicity or 'bhola' nature, yet when enraged to deliver justice, he takes on a Rudra avatar, equivalent to his name.

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We are introduced to the forest officer in a scene that defines the central problem of the conflict. The villagers have hunted down a wild boar and are there in the forest ranger's office to offer him a part of the hunt as a mark of gratitude. But the range or forest officer, Murli, is not amused. He fails to understand two things. First, how can the villagers hunt a wild animal? Second, how dare they offer him apportion of the meal? He starts physically abusing the villagers for the act. The conflict is further explained in the conversation between the DFO and the range officer. While the forest officer Murli claims that unless something is done, the villagers will kill all wild animals, the DFO makes him see reason. He says such behaviour will enhance the conflict, and the villagers will not spare the forest officer. He even mentions that the area is sensitive. People need to be handled properly with compassion. A subsequent scene occurs where the forest department conducts a survey, and the next conflict emerges. The forest officer is shown scolding the villagers for taking leaves and branches from the reserve forest. The conflict is further enhanced as it is also the evening of the Kola festival, and taking tree branches and leaves from the forest is a practice. Even the villagers, including Shiva, plan to kill wild boars on the eve of the Kola festival. The forest officer confronts them, saying they do not know the law of the land. The law prevents them from taking things from the reserve forest. The villagers reply, asking where else they would take these things if not from the forest. The question is about the rights over the resources of the forests. The forest officer clearly states that from now on, a discussion starts between Shiva and the forest officer for every action. The logic provided by the villagers is that they have been living here using the forest resources from an earlier time than when the government came into existence. It is something that they have been enjoying for generations. The main issue of contention is who has stronger rights over the forest and its resources, the people who have been living there for generations or the government that has come into existence by forming laws in the recent past.

Some of the villagers engage in the task of wild boar hunting at night. During this, there is the sighting of a metaphorical wild boar, the Varaha avatar of Lord Vishnu, who is seen wearing the holy anklets of Bhuthkola. This directly references Panjurli, who is revered to be the Varaha incarnation of Vishnu. His faceoff with Shiva's character is metaphorical, too. Fierce Guliga, an incarnation of Lord Shiva, accompanies Panjurli. At the film's start, Panjurli is warned that if the Landlord fails to keep his promise, Guliga will deliver justice to the villagers on Panjurli's



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behalf. The character of Shiva, as the lead protagonist who would save the villagers at the end of the day, save from the Landlord's evil clasp, is like a poetic justice being rendered.

There is an incident where an ornament of the Demigod Panjurli is found on the forest floor. A significant statement is: 'This is more valued and respected than the king's crown.' We get a glimpse of the strong cultural belief system of the people that upholds their culture above the King or Landlord or any wealth. We next see Shiva and his men take a leg of the wild boar (from the hunt) to the Landlord. It is an offering of respect. Here, the Landlord first speaks about the ongoing survey conducted by the forest department. He asks the villagers to keep their land's paperwork ready. Later in a scene, the forest officer shows a 'land encroachment problem' on a map to his senior officials. The seniors convince the officer that sending a notice to the villagers is insufficient. They need to be explained and convinced. The officer replies that the villagers attack forest officers when they are approached. It is not just the encroachment issue that will become the point of contention between the villagers and the forest officials. During the Kola procession, villagers burn firecrackers. The bursting of crackers without the permission of the forest department, which is also in front of the forest officer, becomes the first engagement point between the villagers and the officer. There is a growth of bitterness between officials and villagers. Since the officer is not from the indigenous community, he often fails to see the rituals, traditions and customs from a humanitarian and cultural perspective. He is resolute about following and implementing forest rules as per government acts. But it is here that he fails to solve the friction that is getting built between the administration and the local community. The officer even says some insulting words about Demigod Panjurli. His intention is proper; he is worried about the sound of the crackers harming the forest animals. But the approach fails to strike the right chords. Due to his personal malice or borderline hatred towards the villagers, the officer cannot treat the villagers with compassion. In another scene, where the forest officer's team is getting ready for a raid to handle the encroachment issue, we see how the forest officer intends to frame a few villagers to teach them a lesson. His juniors and locals advise him to avoid such a conflict and try and resort to a better way of making them understand. However, the officer fails to accept it and conflicts with the villagers. His intention, once again, is not impure. His agenda is to mark the boundary of the forest as per government rules and report any cases of encroachment on the

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forest land. He has sent notices to villagers from beforehand who have failed to reply to the legal paper.

The officer fails to understand two very basic things. First, the villagers have a different sentiment attached to the forest since they have lived there for generations. Second, they are uneducated and well-equipped to understand legal matters or government orders. They must be handled with empathy and compassion to make them understand the issue. The villagers and tribals are emotionally driven people attached to their land. A full-blown conflict starts in the village. The village that is nestled in the deep forests suddenly becomes a battleground. The villagers ultimately succumb to the state's power as it becomes a law-and-order situation. There is also inner conflict brewing up. Indigenous community members who had ventured out for government jobs and other contracts suddenly found themselves on the opposite side of the fence. Hence, there is another conflict of a different kind. For example, Leela, the lover of Shiva, a daughter of the same village, who works as a forest guard, finds herself working against the interests of her community. It is a classic case of people from the same community harming each other's interests for small gains.

We see another interesting conflict brewing up at the Landlord's home. The class and caste divide between the Landlord and villagers is made clear when the Landlord's men slap a villager as he accidentally steps into the house. Although the Landlord regularly engages with Shiva to carry out most of his work, he is never seen touching Shiva. This is evident in multiple scenes. Even when the Landlord pays Shiva money, he tosses it without touching Shiva. Caste, untouchability, and class divide are shown. The Landlord belongs to a higher caste, and the villagers are scheduled tribes. However, the Landlord and the villagers teamed up to create problems for the forest officer. Hunting has increased in the region, and more trees are being felled. This puts the efficiency of the forest officer in question. He sits with the villagers to address the problem. However, the villagers see him as a metaphorical representation of the state and a problem. Hence, they keep devising plans to get him transferred. But on a fateful night, when they were unlawfully felling a tree, it crashed on the car of the forest officer. The car caught fire, making it seem like an attempt to murder. As Shiva and the villagers fled into the forest, an undertone of the resurrection of **Panjurli** and **Guliga** was continuously played

out in Shiva's subconscious. Shiva keeps having nightmares and visions of the Varaha avatar, Panjurli. He will play the role of the saviour in the coming days. But he is possibly not yet ready to realize his full potential.

Meanwhile, Shiva and his fellow friends get arrested for the attempt to murder a government officer and violation of sections of the Forest Conservation Act.

Meanwhile, a murder takes place in the village. Shiva's brother, the calm, loving priest who performed Kola, was murdered, and his body was thrown into the village at night. Later, it becomes clear that the Landlord murdered him. There is a clear indication that the Landlord is involved in some malice and is possibly finding ways to usurp the land back from the villagers.

In another scene, we see the forest officials converse amongst themselves. Senior officials continuously emphasize the importance of working together with the villagers. Thus, we see that no matter the conflict, the state always tries to look into the best interests of the villagers and tribals. There is no enmity for any personal gain. The issue for the officials is converting that area of the village in Kaadabettu into a reserve forest. However, the Landlord is planning otherwise. He schemes to con the villagers and takes away their land. A court reply with the Landlord's signature as the property owner clarifies to the forest officials that the Landlord has been scheming for so long and has taken over all the land from the villagers by cheating them. The inherent caste divide and politics of divide and rule are evident in the film. The Landlord, who wishes to use Shiva for his benefit, tricks him into believing that it is the forest official who killed his brother and not him. This is the first time we see the Landlord physically touch Shiva. Later, he wants to wash his hands as he has touched an untouchable. The regressive caste politics is visible here. This is followed by a sequence of fighting, where Shiva awakens and becomes aware of the plot of the Landlord. After awakening, he meets the Landlord, crosses the home boundary, and sits at the same table for dinner.

The conversation which follows is significant. The Landlord asks if he has come to settle scores. Shiva replies that this is Kaliyuga and the caste divide cannot continue. Everyone is free to be everywhere; no one should have the privilege of the upper hand due to caste. The

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metaphorical conversation continues, and Shiva even remarks that the judgement or social justice shall be delivered in the realms of the same forest. He even remarks that time is on their side, emphasizing that the law of the land is in their support, perhaps a reference to the support from the forest officials.

Metaphorical adages and signs are continuously used to establish the awakening of the lower caste to avenge the wrongs done against them. Shiva becomes their mascot, like in mythology. He even carries a 'diva' mashaal (torch flame) that he receives by chance from the daiva, Panjurli, inside the forest. Vishnu's Varaha avatar, or Panjurli, appears before him and takes him deep into the jungle. He is reminded of the scene where his father had disappeared. There is a divine interaction between Shiva and Panjurli. Panjurli reawakens his vision to make things clear.

Meanwhile, in parallel interaction between the forest officials and the villagers, they realize they have been cheated. The officer assures that they can take back their land lawfully as their rights are recognized. Shiva and the forest officials unite to save the forest and the people. The officer says that although they are different individuals, they work for the same cause. They both unite and stand together to fight against the scheming and powerful Landlord. The fight turns bloody, and many lose their lives. The Landlord again humiliates the belief system of the villagers by calling the Demigod Guliga and Panjurli's folklore a mere story told to fool people. There is a divine intervention on hearing this and understanding the threat to the life of the villagers from the Landlord. Demigod Guliga possesses Shiva's body to awaken him. The awakening of Guliga to deliver social justice is a reference to the first scene. Panjurli, before going to the Landlord or King's abode, had said that if the Landlord failed to keep his promises to the villagers, Guliga would return to avenge it. The Landlord is killed, the problems are resolved, the villagers are saved, and the forest conservation is completed in time. Once again, an amalgamation between tradition, mythology and the law of the land, meant to protect the people, is portrayed in the film.

The last scene is the most iconic of the movie. This is where the different elements of the forest, villagers, opinion leaders, police, and forest officials come together for the one common cause

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of humanity: the conservation of natural resources and the human rights of the indigenous tribal population living inside the forest. The resurgence of the Bhuthkola tradition in the village after the conflict is a reassurance of life coming back in peaceful harmony with Nature. The last dance of Bhuthkola is a significant one where the deity Panjurli possesses Shiva and communicates that the villagers, the forest, and the officials are all children of Mother Nature and must stay in harmony with each other. The most iconic scene is where we see every stakeholder come together and join hands. The deity holds them in embrace together and blesses them—a positive approach to portray the end of problems and the need for an inclusive approach.

### **Conclusion**

The film is an apt representation of the problems and aspirations of the Indigenous tribal population in our country, who often struggle to get the very basic amenities or the right to a respectful life for themselves. The film successfully portrays all the major conflicts that plague the context of forest villages caught in the red tape of being converted to reserve forests. Sometimes, it is the Landlord, or at times, it is different capitalist interest groups who try to usurp the land and resources of the tribal population in the forests. The displacement of tribals from their community often means that a part of their rich tradition, history and culture is lost along with them. The film showcases the existence of good and bad in all of us.

Moreover, the film sends a good message that growth, sustainability and even conservation of natural resources need an inclusive approach. The film's commercial success at the box office helped it in two ways. First, it helped take up the subject to a pan-India audience. Second, as a successful Kannada film with such rich cultural content, it encourages more such films in the future from different film industries in India. More filmmakers will be encouraged to tell stories of the remotest parts of our country on the big canvas. Even producers would be willing to take the risk if the story is worth sharing. The film also manages to create awareness about existing laws and the positive and friendly approach of the govt and forest officials towards indigenous tribals. But the best part is how the cultural traditions are showcased in the best possible light

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for a bigger audience to acknowledge. The film is a movement in the right direction with a strong encouragement message for more to come.

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