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## Constructing the identity of Karnataka: A study of select writings of early Kannada nationalists

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### Abstract

In the kind of cultural revivalism that emerged in the closing decades of 19<sup>th</sup> and early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, language, history and culture of a region became significant. Kannada provinces split as they were, witnessed a strong sense of Kannada revivalism. This was more pronounced in the provinces placed under the Bombay Presidency, popularly known as Southern Maratta Country or Bombay Karnataka. Since the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region witnessed the emergence of several intellectuals who were more inclined towards Tilakism. Several publications brought out the rich historical and cultural heritage of Karnataka, importantly, a culturally 'Greater Karnataka'. Significant in this direction is Alur Venkata Rao, Ra. Ha. Deshpande and Sham. Ba. Joshi. In romanticizing Karnataka's past, these writers through their scholarship attempted in a highly persuasive manner not only to project Karnataka's history and culture as far superior to Marathi and other linguistic regions, but made a deliberate attempt to show the manner in which Karnataka's geographical entity and her glorious cultural past was shattered by imperialist designs of the British Raj.

The paper in attempting a critique of these nationalist writer's select works and also analyses the influences upon them, as well as situate them in the kind of a sub nationalism that emerged during the period.

**Keywords:** Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Alur Venkata Rao, Ra. Ha. Deshpande, Sham. Ba. Joshi, N.S. Rajapurohitha, Shivaji, Nationalism, Karnatakva, Karnataka Gatha Vaibhava, Kanmareyaada Kannada, Maharashtra Moola and Kannadada Nele

### Introduction

The cultural revivalism that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century got manifested in several ways. One significant aspect was taking pride in the past. Veneration for cultural and philosophical achievements of the past, importantly the Hindu past was one of the significant aspects. Such a keen spirit of revivalism was quite profound in Western India. Coinciding with the cultural revivalism was a tremendous political ferment especially with the emergence of the new ideology within the Indian National Congress. Developments in Poona and Bombay had an implicit effect upon the Kannada provinces placed under Bombay Presidency. Kannada provinces had been dismembered and placed under the Bombay and Madras Presidencies besides the several Princely states. Kannada speaking provinces under the Bombay Presidency known as Bombay Karnataka and Southern Maratha provinces. The region saw the emergence of several intellectuals who invariably fell under the influence of one or the other of the ideologies or movements that emerged in Presidency. Undeniably, many of the intellectuals particularly from Hubli, Dharwad and Belgaum more inclined towards Tilak and Tilakism.

Of the period under study, there were several who wrote profusely on the history, culture and language of Kannada provinces. There was keen sense of pride in the past, the '*Kannada Past*' very much in tune with the developments at the nationalist level. In the kind of writings that emerged attempt were made to project historically and culturally '*Greater Karnataka*'. Significant in this direction are works of *Alur Venkata Rao, N.S. Rajapurohita, R.H. Deshpande and Sham. Baa Joshi*. In romanticizing Karnataka's past, the scholars through their scholarship attempted in a highly persuasive manner not only to project Karnataka's history and culture as far superior to Marathi and other linguistic regions, but made a deliberate attempt to show the manner in which Karnataka's geographical entity and her glorious cultural past was shattered by imperialist designs of the British Raj.

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Bombay and Poona were the centers of intense nationalistic activities and the students from Kannada regions such as Dharwad, Belgavi, Bijapur who went there for higher education were naturally drawn into the nationalistic current. With Marathi being dominant even in predominantly Kannada speaking regions, Kannadigas felt the need to revive their language and culture as a counter to what they called Marathi bias. This spirit led to a spurt in literary activities and writing in the history of Karnataka. Here also Ganesha and Shivaji festivals were started. The local leadership went a step ahead and made use of such cultural celebrations for the cause of unification of Karnataka. Many leaders like Alur Venkata Rao, Ra. Ha. Deshapande and a host of others who were strongly influenced by the Tilakite ideology started propagating the idea of nationalism along with the idea of Karnatakatva (Kannada identity). The new generation of literatures now started to imitate the idea of nationalism and Karnatakatva. In 1917 the well-known *Karnataka Gatha Vaibhava* of Alur Venkata Rao was published. Revivalism and glorification of the past was the main theme in such writings. Here an attempt is made to study the historical writings of the period. Particularly the writings of Alur Venkata Rao, N.S. Rajapurohita, R.H. Deshapande and Sham.Baa.Joshi.

Alur Venkata Rao popularly known as '*Karnataka Kula Purohita*' (High Priest of Karnataka) can be called as forerunner of the cause. Being a Tilakite he wrote his famous work *Karnataka Gata Vaibhaba* in 1917 which later became role model for many writers. This work is the finest example for the revivalist tendency. He also authored nearly 27 books including *Karnataka Veera Ratnagalu* (1930), and *Raashtreeyatvada Meemamse* (1940). He also translated many books from English and Marathi. Mainly the *Geetha Rahasya* of Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

Alur Venkata Rao during his student days in Pune underwent the inferior discrimination of Marathi bias. This led him to think about the history and heritage of Kannada. His first work on history was '*Sri Vidyaranya Charitre*' (1907). Later he wrote '*Kannadigara Bhramanirasanavu*' (1913)<sup>[1]</sup>. Having keen interest in history of Karnataka Alur tried his best to bring out the glorious past of Karnataka and popularize it. For this cause he established many organizations like '*Karnataka Itihasa Mandala*' (1914).

Being staunch Tilakite he also participated in the movement for freedom. Following the model of Tilak he organized *Nada Habba*, *Vidyaranya Ustava*, *Vijayanagara Ustava*, *Basaveshwara Ustava*, *Kumaravyasa Ustava* etc.<sup>[2]</sup>

Two works of Alur, *Karnataka Gatha Vaibhava* and *Karnatakada Veera Rathnagalu* are the best example of revivalistic tendency the period. *Gatha Vaibhava* was written by Alur after visiting Hampi. In this book he highlights the glory of past Karnataka in a heroic manner. The Marathi bias of the region made Alur to propagate the cause of Kannada strongly. For the first time he coined the word '*Karnatakatva*' which was similar to *Raashtreeyatva* or nationalism<sup>[3]</sup>. But he strongly opines that Karnatakatva is never against Nationalism. He calls Karnataka as the daughter of Mother India. The main aim of Alur is to boost the moral strength of Kannadigas against the Marathi dominance. In his book *Karnatakada Veera Rathnagalu* also he chooses the great men and women from the annals of history to present them in a heroic manner to that the reader should be inspired from them<sup>[4]</sup>. He also edited a journal by name *Jaya Karnataka*.

Narayana Srinivasa Rajapurohita (1887-1953) is a significant but less known nationalist writer of the period. Being a contemporary of Alur Venkata Rao he actively participated in the activities of Karnataka Itihasa Samshodhana Mandala. His first work was '*Dana Dharma Paddati*' which was published in 1910. Later he seriously engaged himself in research. He has authored six books namely *Sri Sureshwaracharyara Charitre*, *Karnatakada Itihasa*, *Srimanmadhavacharyarumattu Sri Jayathirthara Caritreya*, *Yagnyavarkyara Charitre* and *Mahasadhvi Thimmammanavara Charitre*<sup>[5]</sup>. He has authored more than sixty research articles on various aspects like history, Kannada language and Kannada grammar.

It is important to note that Rajapurohita was not a professionally trained historian. One important aspect of his research is that his keen interest in examining the facts. He makes use of both literary and archaeological sources to defend his arguments. It is well evident in his articles. He claims that he was the first to identify the Warfield of Talikota or Rakkasagi-Tangadagi. Another significant contribution of Rajapurohita was to discover the period and place of many Kannada poets. Starting with the authorship and period of '*Kaviraja Marga*' – the first Kannada ----- -- work, he discovered the periods of Ranna, Nagavarma, Harihara, Kumaravyasa, Kanakadasa, Rathnakaravarni, Lakshmisha, Chaundarasa<sup>[6]</sup>.

Mediating between Kannada and Marathi relation is the most significant research contribution of Rajapurohita. Early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century was the period which was the heated debates over linguistic issues. Kannadigas started the counter attack on Marathi dominance. The concept of greater Karnataka emerged slowly due to several reasons to which Rajapurohit's contribution was noteworthy. At this stage Rajapurohita's series of articles in '*Kesari*' no doubt strengthened the cause of Kannadigas. Six articles namely '*Maharashtra Va Karnataka*' tried to establish the idea of greater Karnataka profoundly<sup>[7]</sup>. Making use of archaeological, literary, linguistic and folk sources Rajapurohita argues that earlier Maharashtra was a part of Karnataka and Marathi originated much later. He strongly defended the greatness of Kannada. For his argument he made use of Tilak's speech at GurlaHousr. He further tried to establish that Vithala of Pandarapura was also basically Kannadiga. For the first time he identified a number of Kannada words in Jnaneshwari. He opines that Goa, Kolhapur, Satara, Solapur, Poona, Konkana were basically Kannada speaking places. Further he argues that Rattas of Savadatti, Yadavas of Devagiri, Shilahara were Kannadigas. Quoting the example of Sureshwaracharya (earlier Mandanamishra) he argues that during 8<sup>th</sup> century Kannada empire was extended up to river Narmada<sup>[8]</sup>.

Ramachandra Hanamantha Deshapande was another noteworthy scholar of the period. Being a historian, he has also authored 12 books mainly, *Chaitnya Charitre* (1891), *Great Britain Irland Deshagala Sankshipta Varnane* (1892), *Charitra Sangraha* (1892), *Akbar Chakravarthiya Charitre* (1893), *Moghal Badshahi* (1895), *Bharata Khanadada Dharmasthaapakaru -Dharma Sudhaarakaroo* (1896), *Chatrapathi Sivaaji Mahaaraja* (1923), *Karnataka Saamraajya in 3 volumes*. Besides he has also authored books like *Baayilekkada Modalaneya Pustaka* (1896) and *Kathegalanologonda Beeraballana Charitre* (1923) for school students<sup>[9]</sup>. He strongly believed that the progress of Kannadigas can be achieved through history. He

started writing Karnataka Saamraajya vol. 1 in 1921 and finished it by 1923 and later it was first published in 1926. The second volume was published in 1929.

In all the volumes of of *Karnataka Saamraajya* he makes references to several source materials. Importantly, he makes use of writings of B. L. Rice, J. F. Fleet, R. G. Bhandarkar, and the Gazetteers of Mumbai Presidency. Indian Antiquary was another important source for the construction of the history of Karnataka for Raa. Ha. Deshpande. From these works, he chooses the points which are suitable for his purpose and ignores unimportant ones. In order to consolidate his arguments he employs inscriptions and indulges in interpreting them differently. He uses his Sanskrit scholarship for the purpose<sup>[10]</sup>.

An important point about Raa. Ha. Deshpande's volumes are that he makes use of literary sources to the maximum. He finds many important historical point to substantiate his argument in *KavirajaMarga of Sri Vijaya*, *Shabdamani Darpana by Keshi Raja*, *Gadhayudda by Ranna*, *Aadi Purana*, *Vikramarjuna Vijaya by Pampa*, *Shanthi Purana by Janna*, *Mitakshara Samhitya by Vignaneshwara* and other works. Sincerely, he quotes many inscriptions from Indian Antiquary and analyses them. However, he does not hesitate to express suspicion about sources and authorship of inscriptions. Though he infers liberally about chronology of history, he is liberal enough to accept them also. Whenever it is a matter of literary or religious works, he highlights Kannada culture proudly. At the same time, he laments the loss of pride in it during his contemporary period. Raa. Ha. wholeheartedly accepts other researches in the area of his interest. He often makes references of contemporary research scholars like M. Govinda Pai, N.S. Rajapurohita, Narasimhachar and others as and when necessary. Very interestingly, he does not mention the works of Alur Venkata Rao. Both were from north Karnataka and were working with the same ideology of nationalism and unification of Karnataka and were good friends.

Construction of history was not a habit or profession for Raa. Ha. Deshpande. It was a sacred duty for him. He got inspiration from the goddess of Karnataka Shakaambari Devi in his dream to write about the history of Karnataka. His main aim was to develop the concept of "*Thaayi Nadu*" (mother land). Being an extreme nationalist, he echoes nationalism in all his writings through the masculine language and meanings. For instance, in the introduction chapter of his work he provokes Kannadigas by declaring 'at the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century we (then Kannadigas) were not unenthusiastic, unenergetic and impotent. Our "*Veereshri*" was not dry like the present day. In all his works Raa. Ha. quotes from Gita, Manusmruthi, and other Sanskrit work and continues his provocations and challenges to Kannadigas<sup>[11]</sup>.

Raa. Ha. Deshpande was a witness to both Tilak and the Gandhian era. In his early phase, he was influenced by Tilak and later the ideas of Gandhi also touched him. As, a result, we can see the references of Hindu-Muslim unity in his works. He quotes Akbar many times as a symbol of unity. At the same time, he argues that in ancient Karnataka there were no clashes between religions. There were instances of '*Roti-Beti*' (inter dining and inter marriage) relations between Hindus and Jains<sup>[12]</sup>. He emphasizes that the Karnataka kings never discriminated between Shaiva and Vaishnava. To substantiate his argument he makes the reference of the famous Belur Inscription which describes

Shiva, Vishnu and Buddha all are one. At the same time, in all these instances he praises the noble qualities of Kannadigas in the ancient times.

In Raa. Ha. Deshpande's works may be identified a kind of revivalistic tendency that has taken shape since the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was influenced by some of the nationalists of the day who were staunch followers of Tilak. He had good relations with staunch Tilakite like Alur Venkata Rao. As other nationalists of the region he also wrote about Shivaji. Very interestingly, he was the one who stood strongly against the Marathi dominance in the region. He defends his work i.e. writing the history of Shivaji by quoting the statement of Lokamanya Tilak that earlier both Kannada and Marathi were one and the same. Kannada was the mother of Marathi. At the same time he raised his voice against the cultural domination of other language people including Marathi.

Dr. Shankara Bala Dixita Joshi (1896-1991) popularly known as Sham. Baa. Joshi was a renowned thinker and scholar of Modern Karnataka. He was a journalist, freedom fighter and at the same he participated in the movement for unification of Kannada provinces. Through his scholarly works he tried to uphold the linguistic heritage of Kannada. Mainly *Kanmareyada Kannada*, (1933), *Maharashtra Moola* (1934), *Karnatakada Veera Kshathriyaru* (1937), *Kannudiya Huttu* (1937) *Kannadada Nele* (1939) are few important works of Joshi which deals with the History and heritage of Karnataka and Kannada.

Three works of Joshi – *Kanmareyaada Kannada*, *Maharashtra Moola* and *Kannadada Nele* are related to the history, language and culture of Karnataka. Here was an attempt to establish the greatness of Karnataka's past, its history and culture. *Kanmareyada Kannada Athava Kannadara Moolasthanana* a scholarly work of Joshi deals with the history of Karnataka and Kannada language. As Joshi himself admits the work was carried out in the light of Philology and history<sup>[13]</sup>. The main intention of the work was to identify the birthplace of Kannada by which, he felt many questions with regard to the history of Deccan could be answered<sup>[14]</sup>.

By rejecting the existing belief that Karnata and Karnataka are two words meaning same, Joshi felt that they are different words with meaning. In the very beginning he raises a question about the 'Martial Race of Karnata Kshtriya' who established empires in Mithila, Nepal and Bengal<sup>[15]</sup>. Then Joshi takes up Kaviraja Marga the first Kannada work by Nripatunga or Shrivijaya. Quoting the famous lines of Kaviraja Marga i.e. "Kaveriyindamaa Godavari varemirda Naadadaa Kannadadol, Bhavisida Janapadam. . . ." Joshi states that Nripatunga was the first Kannadiga to unite many Kannadas<sup>[16]</sup>.

With the argument that Kannada in previous times was not a name of language but of a place of province just like English, French and Arabic which are synonym to their respective countries<sup>[17]</sup>. With the help of philology he interprets the word Kannada *Kan+Nada* in which *Nada* originated from *Nadu* that means province. So in Joshi's opinion the word Karnata originated from Kannada was the name of the province not mere language. With this basic argument he examines all other languages of the south. In support to his argument, Joshi brings the Arya-Anarya controversy. After examining certain aspects based on Vedas and Upanishads he concludes that the land of Andhas (the darkness) was Andhra<sup>[18]</sup>. Then he turns towards the

Telugu language. Quoting certain texts he argues that the mother land of Telugu – Vengi Mandala was a pure Kannada land till 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Chalukyas of Vengi- a cult from Chalukyas of Badami ruled it. Renowned Kannada literatures Pampa, Naga Varma, Palkurike Somanatha were from Vengi Mandala. And finally quoting C.R.Reddy, Sham. Baa argues that till 11-12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Telugu was an Island Language in south like Scotch and Wales in England <sup>[19]</sup>. Hence, Joshi feels the south of river Godavari earlier was a part of Karnata.

Speaking with Tamil, Sham. Baa. Opinions that even Tamil in early days was the name of province not the language <sup>[20]</sup>. With all above statements Joshi finally argues that Dravida in ancient times originally meant Kannada a province not the language. This Kannada the language of province Kannada was the first language subjugated by external language of Aryans i.e. Sanskrit <sup>[21]</sup>.

In the next phase Joshi takes up the study of some tribes/clans/castes like Kurumba (Kuruba), Golla and Holey. Based on their name, language, custom and tradition he argues that these tribes were the inhabitants of Central Provinces. Their culture and languages are more resembles with Kannada language and culture. Hence, Joshi feels it is the true Ancient Karnata or Nija Karnata <sup>[22]</sup>. The main occupation of Central Provinces was cattle domestication. A number of Hero Stones – contribution of Kannadas – are found in this area. Hence, the province originally a land of Kannadas. Another sect of inhabitants of this province was Billavas. The word Billava originated from a Kannada word Billu meaning Bow. So the area in which Billavas are found i.e. Khandesh and Gujarat are the land of Kannada Province. In support Joshi argues that the word Khandesh originated from Kandara Nadu, a Kannada word, which later by miss spelt became Khandesh in the mouth of Muslims <sup>[23]</sup>.

After examining all these areas Sham. Baa turns towards Maharashtra, which was his main target. By rejecting the belief that the word Maharashtra originated from Prakrit, he argues that the original word was Maha +Rastra a Kannada word. Marathi, which pronounced by Joshi as Mahratti has borrowed a lot from Kannada in respect of language, grammar, proverbs, customs and practices and even the religious aspects. A plenty of Kannada words can be found in Jnaneshwari the sacred book for Marathis. In the opinion of Joshi, the word Marathi itself was originated from the Kannada word Mara+Hatti. Here Mara means the big one and Hatti means area. In support here Joshi quotes the speech made by Lokamanya Tilak at Gurla Hosur, saying that earlier Kannada and Marathi were one and the same. Later Marathi separated from its mother tongue i.e. Kannada <sup>[24]</sup>. Just like Alur Venkata Rao <sup>[25]</sup>, Sham. Baa also argues that many gods worshipping in Maharashtra, including Vittala, Kandhoba, Pandhari and Malhari were basically from Kannada land <sup>[26]</sup>. Further, names of many places in Maharashtra were originated from Kannada argues Sham. Baa <sup>[27]</sup>.

In a separate chapter devoted to history of Deccan Joshi argues that one of the early dynasties of Deccan Sathavahana were Kannadigas. Their names like Hala and Pulimavi were from Kannada origin. The later dynasties in south chalukya and Rastrakutas, in north Senas of Bengal, Rulers of Mithils were also Kannadas <sup>[28]</sup>. At the end Sham.Baa concludes that the area between Kaveri-Godavari and Narmada was the original Kannada province. The main

reason for the decline of this great Kannada Empire in ancient time was the Invasion of Sanskrit through Brahmins <sup>[29]</sup>.

Joshi having mastery over Kannada, Sanskrit, Marathi and English made use of his scholarship for this work. It is evident from the bibliography of this book <sup>[30]</sup>. By a careful examination of his work one can feel that it was highly revivalist in nature. Joshi basically was an active member in unification movement. No doubt he was highly influenced by Karnataka Gatha Vaibhava (1917) of Alur Venkata Rao, a first revivalist work on Karnataka history in Kannada. Particularly the Kannadigas of Bombay-Karnataka region who were suffered a lot from the Marathi domination, cultivated this kind of tendency. In many aspects Joshi follows the idea of Alur, particularly while explaining the geographical extension of Karnataka <sup>[31]</sup>. Later Alur coined this Kannada Nationalism as Karnatakva. The main intention behind such works was to bring awareness among the Kannadigas and to defend their Kannada culture in front of neighboring cultures. But it does not mean that all scholars of Karnataka were in the same spirit. Renowned scholar, literature and critique D.L. Narasimhachar has strong criticized the argument of Joshi <sup>[32]</sup>. Joshi's statements like Telugu language was a island language and Kannada was expanded beyond the river Godavari was strongly questioned by D.L. Narasimhachar.

The above mentioned Nationalist writers tried to bring linguistic awareness among the Kannadigas through history. For the first time in the modern Karnataka the history of language and heritage was widely used to create unique linguistic identity. To counterpart the cultural attack by neighboring languages, the writers of the region who were more Tilakite in spirit wrote such works. Their writings are good example of extremist ideology. The made use of religion for their purpose. But their main intention was to serve the mother language.

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