



Karnad and the limits of Nehruvian intellectualism

The rise of the BJP owes a lot to Nehruvian intellectuals, though this is something that neither would like to accept, with both accusing the other being anti-national. The recent death of celebrated thespian Girish Karnad however brought this irony out to the fore again.

Karnad was perhaps one of the most outspoken of the BJP's critics from the establishment. And he was definitely high up in the establishment, being a Brahmin, a Rhodes and Fullbright scholarship awardee, the former head of various central government arts bodies, and winner of top state awards. But the obituaries that followed his death spent more space discussing his support for liberal causes, his outspoken antipathy to the Hindutva project, and his valiant participation in public protests against the increasing violence and toxic hatred of today's India despite being arrested by the authorities, getting death threats and stones thrown at his house, and recent failing health. Also how he didn't mind ruffling feathers with his opinions, as, for example, when he blasted Nobel laureate Naipaul for his anti-Muslim writing at a literary meet, and also blasted the organisers of the meet for giving Naipaul a life-time award; and how he declared that Tipu Sultan – an oppressor of Hindus, according to the BJP-RSS – would have surely enjoyed the present public stature of Shivaji, if only he had not been Muslim.

There is definitely something moving in the oft-published and recent photograph of him, unable to speak but taking part in the protest on the anniversary of the murder of Gauri Lankesh, with a pipe in his nose connected to an oxygen supplier in his lap, and a placard saying '#MeTooUrbanNaxal' around his neck. Of course, we belong to a nation where we often see very poor, very ill, and very old people forced to come on the streets to protect their basic right to life, without even slippers leave aside medical aids, only to be lathi-charged, or arrested, or generally treated horribly by the authorities. But that sight is normal, in fact often not even reported. Today, however, the few elites who criticise the system are being told in no uncertain terms to shut up, at the cost of their freedom or life. In such a situation, to have a celebrity like Karnad – an international name who straddled the worlds of theatre, literature, film, administration, and academia for decades – protesting on the street was certainly something.

And his death too was notably dignified for a member of the Indian establishment: a private funeral with no procession, no 21-gun salute, no public display of the body, nothing of the state-sponsored extravaganza that marks the passing of big-shots nowadays. One can't help but contrast it with the politicised funeral of Manohar Parrikar in Goa not long ago, so clearly milked for all the public emotion it could extract.

But, if there is something admirable about Karnad's outspokenness against BJP-RSS politics, one must also recognise the irony of this stance. Because his antipathy to the Hindutva world went hand in hand with a lifelong passion for Brahmanical India – the very same Brahmanism that is at the core of the RSS project. Everything that Karnad did professionally was a celebration of Brahminism, or rather 'good' Brahminism. He is in fact credited for giving a new direction to Indian theatre; at a time when it was moving towards issues and writings of the West, it was he who brought in stories from the Mahabharata, the Puranas, Kalidas, etc, i.e. from the Brahmanical and Sanskrit world that he had been raised in. His leading characters were often 'good' Brahmins, even when taking up issues of social reform, even caste atrocities or anti-caste movements. When he spoke about fearless social and political thinkers of Maharashtra (EPW 1997), the names of Phule and Ambedkar were accompanied by Karve, Gokhale and even Tilak, 'the granddaddy of all Hindutvawadis' (Somwanshi, 2015). He participated in programmes of Goa's Nagri Konkani lobby, responsible for foisting a useless and Brahmanical version of the language on the largely Bahun students of government schools. In a film about the influences on his work, made by Sahitya Akademi (K M Chaitanya 2007), he mentioned how lucky he was to belong to the Saraswat community because it was an 'educated community'. Not a dominant community, not a privileged community, but just an 'educated community', as if it is a community's choice to be educated or not. How many lost lives, right up to the institutional killings of Rohit Vemula and Payal Tadvi today, are hidden in this disarming description?

Don't forget that we are talking of a person who 'played an important role shaping the cultural policy of India', as the same film mentions, as a result of helming a number of state cultural institutions. So, what was this cultural policy that he shaped? G Aloysius (1998) has pointed out that Indian nationalism is not a political nationalism based on political rights, but a cultural nationalism based on upholding the casteist culture of the Brahmanical elites, along with all its traditional hierarchies, discrimination, and atrocities. And, in the realm of the arts, it was people like Karnad who did the work of public dissemination of Brahmanical ideas, normalising the privileged position of the dominant castes, spreading sympathy for the 'poor' and 'good' Brahmin, appropriating and Brahminising folk art traditions, making all of this the art culture of the new nation, and thus firming the Brahmanical base in which the RSS would flourish.

Yes, things have changed. Earlier atrocities could be depicted in the 'progressive' art of the metros, and even win state awards; now such depiction is seditious and results in jail if not worse. Earlier politicians would offer compensation (even if they didn't actually give it) to victims of violence; now Central ministers pose with lynching-accused. Earlier caste-based reservations were quietly ignored, to ensure that 'educated communities' preserved their monopoly; now we have 10% reservations for the dominant castes which the Goa

government – infamous for subverting caste-based reservations — is rushing to implement. In short, barbarism and toxic hatred are not new for India. They were just kept out of the limelight, even as the nation – via foreign-educated-but-fluent-in-Sanskrit intellectuals like Karnad — claimed to be a liberal and secular democracy. Now they are too big to be hidden.

There is no doubt that Karnad’s presence will be missed, especially by those of the art world whose beliefs, values or very existence finds them increasingly at loggerheads with the forces of fascism. But, after spending much of his life Brahminising the art discourse, these are actually his chickens now coming home to roost.

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