



Examining (in)justice, environmental activism and indigenous knowledge systems in the Indian film *Kantara* (Mystical Forest)

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Abstract

The acquisition of knowledge encompasses various dimensions that should be consolidated to facilitate a comprehensive and holistic advancement of its trajectory. In this context, the article explores the film *Kantara: A Legend* (Shetty in *Kantara: a legend [film]*, Hombale Films, 2022), a Kannada-language production from India and its significance in highlighting the importance of indigenous knowledge systems, local customs, demigods and the sacredness attributed to the forest. The article explicates the marginalization of these knowledge systems and the community's vulnerability to epistemic and environmental injustices. Additionally, the article highlights the importance of the sacredness of their land and the community's engagement in activism. The study concludes by examining how a film such as *Kantara* serves as a means to disseminate the notion of environmental activism to a wide audience.

Keywords Indigenous knowledge systems · Injustice · Epistemology · India · Environmental activism · *Kantara*

1 Film and environmental activism

The environment has been a subject of considerable attention and activism for a significant period of time. In September 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General issued a call for a decade of action pertaining to sustainable development, urging “youth, civil society, the media, the private sector, unions, academia and other stakeholders” (Guterres 2019) to actively engage in environmental activism, highlighting the diverse range of potential actors involved in promoting sustainable practices (Wolbring and Gill 2023). Film, as one of the significant mediums of media and popular culture, in its capacity as a narrative and aesthetic dimension, holds the potential to not only inform viewers of environmental concerns but also encourage them to take proactive measures. Utilizing films effectively can help create bridges across socio-cultural and political disparities and aid in developing

strategies that foster broader implementation. Films may successfully convey information, criticize and traverse the dynamics of power while addressing environmental issues (Pal and Karmakar 2024, p. 2). Films captivate audiences with their compelling narratives, impactful visuals and emotionally resonant storytelling, thereby motivating them to express novel perspectives on environmental activism and personal responsibility (Janpol and Dilts 2016; Monani 2008). Films centered around environmental issues reinforce preexisting environmental discussions, and when these films garner increased recognition and success, they effectively disseminate environmental themes to a broader spectrum of viewers, necessitating a response from individuals within their respective cultures (Rostick and Frentz 2009). In this particular context, environmental activism can be defined as the collective efforts undertaken by individuals or organized groups to protect and advocate for the natural environment. These endeavors involve the identification of various challenges that pose a threat to the sustainability of the planet, ranging from local community issues to global concerns. Subsequently, activists devise strategies aimed at raising awareness and generating solutions that effectively tackle these environmental problems. This form of activism aims to establish a harmonious living environment that may be passed down through successive generations while avoiding the negative consequences of inadequate human governance.

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To understand environmental activism in postcolonial India, it is imperative to examine the discussion from a broader perspective. The presence of environmental deterioration and contamination, along with the inaction and deficiencies of governmental authorities in addressing these issues, has resulted in the emergence and widespread growth of various forms of environmentalism and organized environmental movements in India (Gadgil and Guha 1994, 1995). Environmental activism in India involves the study of environmental movements across different parts of the country. It primarily focuses on rural regions, marginalized and subaltern communities that are striving to safeguard their agricultural livelihoods and local ecosystems. Additionally, numerous non-governmental organizations in India are actively involved in conducting environmental research, providing public education, disseminating information and offering training in various domains for safeguarding the environment (Follmann 2016, pp. 3–4). Similarly, the Indian film industry has stepped into a position of “environmental subject” (Agrawal 2005, p. 16), in which the environment is portrayed as a crucial area of focus for both thinking and taking action. The premise of the “environmental subject” is manifested when everyday actions are linked to specific interpretations of environmental ‘friendliness’ or adverse effects and when these interpretations align with individuals’ awareness of important aspects of their natural environment (Agrawal 2005; Walker 2017, pp. 13–14). Thus, the Indian film industry, in the words of Bahk (2010), Arendt and Matthes (2016), and Janpol and Dilts (2016), is striving to shape public perception and generate political transformation, a notion corroborated by different organizations within the disciplines of environmental conservation and forestry.

Cinematic visuals have the potential to stimulate the decision-making processes of viewers by urging people to take action and enhance their actions for safeguarding the environment. As Lee et al. (2023) note, “through film, we can realize and understand the environmental crisis that we are facing due to manmade scenarios that affect climate change and the consequences that we have to live with and create for our next generations” (p. 188). In recent years, the Indian Hindi film industry has produced a number of films such as *Jungle* (2019), *Sherni* (2021), *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* (2022) and *Bhediya* (2022), addressing multiple subjects including capitalist greed, human-animal conflict, poaching and environmental conservation. The representation of these issues here strives to educate and raise awareness, thereby fostering a change in public perception toward matters of conservation and sustainability. The inclusion of pertinent information within these films serves to offer viewers a distinct shift in environmental perspective and a range of viewpoints. The film *Sherni* explores the complexities of the conflict between development and conservation, highlighting the challenges caused by corruption within the conservation

system. It also delves into the concept of environmental justice, examining the feasibility of balancing the interests of wildlife and indigenous communities (Karmakar and Sarkar 2023, p. 2447). The film *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* focuses on the human-wildlife conflict in India, specifically addressing issues such as poaching, destruction of habitats, lack of knowledge about the local ecosystem, anthropocentric practices that disregard the well-being of wildlife, negative impacts of urbanization, the challenges faced by impoverished communities and the political complexities surrounding conservation efforts (Karmakar and Pal 2023, p. 324). The indigenous endeavor to create a western-style narrative within the shapeshifter or werewolf genre of films and TV shows, titled the film *Bhediya*, conveys a pertinent message to the viewer (Dutta 2022). This message employs a combination of folklore and unexpected developments, while also conveying a crucial message on safeguarding the local environment and ecological harm experienced by forests and indigenous communities in India. These films primarily emphasize rural socio-environmental principles and the underlying idea of “environmentalism of the poor” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997), highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental justice and the difficulties faced by disadvantaged individuals. The above-mentioned films contribute to the development of “community environmentalism” (Læssøe 2016), which seeks to bring about policy change by facilitating dialogue among stakeholders, including the dissemination of evidence-based information, proposing environmentally friendly options, incorporating local knowledge and emphasizing the notion of environmental consciousness as “the responsibility of both individuals and communities to allow meaningful existence for all” (Ramugondo and Kronenberg 2015, p. 12). This emphasizes the significance of following updated forms of knowledge related to indigenous, folk, rural and marginalized narratives, confirming their intellectual and environmental worth (Karmakar and Chetty 2023, p. 107).

The mention of local knowledge signifies the recognition of indigenous peoples’ knowledge systems and practices as an important resource for environmental sustainability and adaptation in climate change policies. However, there has been inconsistent utilization of this knowledge in adaptation initiatives, and it has frequently been overlooked in policy, academic and socio-cultural endeavors (Petzold et al. 2020). The subtle representation of indigenous and subaltern people in films like *Sherni*, *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* and *Bhediya* emphasizes the need for a unique approach to indigenous environmental activism, which is necessary to tackle the ecological crisis and the specific forms of discrimination and injustices faced by these communities. In order to accurately represent indigenous viewpoints on beneficial environmental initiatives, it is essential for this activism to be rooted in “indigenous philosophies, ontologies, and epistemologies”

(McGregor et al. 2020, p. 35). In the given context, the Indian Kannada-language film *Kantara: A Legend* (Shetty 2022), available on OTT platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, serves as a notable medium for emphasizing the significance of indigenous knowledge systems, local culture, demigods and the sacredness associated with the forest. The narrative centers around a king who exchanges his forest region with a demigod in order to attain tranquility of the mind. Subsequently, the demigod bestows the land upon the indigenous people and cautions the King that any attempt by him or his progeny to reclaim the territory will result in catastrophic repercussions. Subsequently, conflicts emerge among the government, the successors of the King and tribal groups regarding the ownership of forest. The blending of rituals, divinity and reality results in an engaging and conclusive outcome. The depiction of environmental issues in fictional or dramatized narratives in this film has the capacity to engage and influence a diverse audience, as Norman (2000) notes that films can “visually transport people to places and situations they might otherwise never experience” (p. 28). While Norman’s argument directs the educational impact of a film like *Kantara*, the article, while studying the film from the perspective of epistemological plurality, emphasizes, in the words of Chaudhury and Colla (2021), the importance of prioritizing voices that differ from our own and advocates for active engagement rather than placing additional burdens on marginalized communities and for the equitable distribution of power and natural resources.

2 Indigeneity and epistemological plurality: contextualizing *Kantara*

Although environmentalism and its associated activism are often perceived as recent developments in Western culture, anthropologists have shed light on the inventive beliefs and practices utilized by non-Western, local and indigenous communities to effectively inhabit diverse ecological regions in a sustainable manner (Willow 2018). Indigenous communities play a pivotal role in environmental management and the preservation of biodiversity. Despite constituting barely five percent of the global population, indigenous communities exert significant control and impact over a minimum of 28% of the Earth’s landmass, encompassing around 20% of the earth’s protected regions (Garnett et al. 2018). They serve as both transmitters and caretakers of ecosystems, while also possessing distinctive and valuable indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) that is crucial for the sustainable management of the natural environment. The term “ILK” in this context refers to the collective knowledge, practices and beliefs that have developed and changed over time through adaptive processes. This information is passed down through

cultural transmission between generations and pertains to the interactions between organisms, including humans, and the natural world. ILK also refers to a form of knowledge that is ‘relational and situational’ (Raffles 2002) when it encompasses assertions of authority over land and resources, particularly when confronted with challenges from external forces (Berkes et al. 2000; Berkes 2018). These mentioned knowledge systems encompass what Dei (2000) characterizes as “indigenous informed epistemology,” which serves as a comprehensive framework that informs the community’s engagement with their surrounding environments. Indigenous peoples and local communities have developed enduring connections with their concerning environment and acquired comprehensive knowledge over the course of generations, enabling them to sustain a balanced social–ecological system. Furthermore, these individuals have successfully navigated through a diverse range of crises and obstacles, including adjustments in livelihood patterns, changes in climate and ecosystems and a decline in resource availability (Pearce et al. 2015; Burgos-Ayala et al. 2020). Hence, the inclusion of their knowledge system garners further significance in advancing sustainable development and environmental governance, particularly in remote and rural regions (Brondizio and Le Tourneau 2016; Lam et al. 2020).

Various terminologies have been developed and are employed to conceptualize the wide-ranging knowledge possessed by ‘Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities’ (IPLC), such as “local ecological knowledge” (Davis and Wagner 2003), “indigenous knowledge” (Gadgil et al. 1993), and “traditional ecological knowledge” (Berkes 2018). Indigenous and local knowledge systems are commonly recognized as comprehensive collections of interconnected social and ecological knowledge, practices and beliefs. These refer to the interactions between living organisms, encompassing both humans and their environment. Indigenous and local knowledge is firmly rooted in specific geographic regions, exhibiting a rich array of diversity and perpetually developing through the interplay of experiential encounters, innovative practices and a wide range of knowledge forms, including written, oral, tangible, implicit, gendered, practical and disciplinary expertise (Pierotti 2011; Burke et al. 2023). The provided ontologies and terminologies, which are both “epistemologically pluralistic and intercultural” (R’boul 2022), are conceived as a rhetorical approach to knowledge acquisition. This approach addresses diverse epistemological objectives and aims to enhance the development of new frameworks, techniques and knowledge production for indigenous peoples and local communities. While there has been considerable study on the comprehensive integration of varied knowledge systems into climate research and environmental problem-solving, the acknowledgment of indigenous and local knowledge systems is frequently constrained. The potential for transformative change

across multiple knowledge systems is contingent upon the full and comprehensive respect given to these systems as complete and inseparable cultural entities encompassing knowledge, practices, values and worldviews (Orlove et al. 2023). Within this particular setting, *Kantara* highlights a significant cultural shift within Indian cinema and draws influence from the preceding wave of “mythologicals,” specifically the popular “Amman/Ammoru films of the 1990s and the early 2000s that flourished and faded with India’s economic liberalisation” (Srinivasan 2022, n.p.).

The focal point of the film centers on the tribal community located in India, namely in the coastal village of Kaadubettu in the state of Karnataka. Tribal people are recognized as the indigenous inhabitants of Indian society, primarily residing in forest and mountainous regions, and relying entirely on the natural environment for their sustenance. Tribal communities live in isolation and prioritize autonomy in their choice of livelihood choices. Nevertheless, the British colonial administration of India initiated a process of invasion that impinged upon the autonomy and independence of the tribal communities (Panigrahi 2023, p. 2). While the central focus of the film pertains to the legal entitlements of tribal communities to the ancestral territories they have inhabited for multiple generations, the narrative of the film revolves around two demigods, namely Panjurli, a boar face demigod, who embodies the concepts of prosperity and guidance, and Guliga, a Kshetrapala known for fiercely safeguarding fields. The narrative of the film explores the conflict between the King’s descendants, who offer land to the tribal community in return for their demigod Panjurli, and the tribal themselves, the Forest Department’s endeavors to save wildlife and trees from hunting and deforestation carried out by the tribal population, and Shiva’s, the central character who becomes inhabited by the divine entity, disregard of norms and regulations and unwavering dedication to his community. Thus, *Kantara* effectively addresses the symbolic three-way conflict involving the secular state, the faithful majority and the transitional remnant of the old order as represented by the forest officer, the descendants of the tribe and the extractive landlord and his exploitative practices. In such a context, what is needed is “to find ways to give a voice to local knowledges without smothering them in totalizing theories” (Turnbull 1991, p. 572). Against this backdrop, the article explicates the significance of the local knowledge system and culture of the tribal communities as depicted in the film. It should be noted that the phrases ‘local knowledge’, ‘indigenous knowledge’ and ‘traditional knowledge’ are used interchangeably in this context, notwithstanding their distinct qualities, as the comprehensive examination of the semantic components of these phrases goes beyond the parameters of this article. The article posits additional arguments on the marginalization of these knowledge systems and the community’s exposure to epistemic

and environmental injustices, as well as the significance of their land’s sacredness and the community’s activism. The article, in this regard, argues how the film encourages the development and application of knowledge in socio-ecological practice, which encompasses various activities such as strategic planning, environmentalism, “construction, restoration, and management of [tribal] settlements and their support systems” (Xiang 2018, p. 1). The article concludes with further discussion of how a film like *Kantara* promotes awareness through environmental activism for the masses.

3 Tribal and territories of life: land, rituals and knowledge system

The narrative of *Kantara* commences around the eighteenth century, whereby a king embarks on a quest to ascertain ultimate peace and happiness. On this journey, the king encounters a sacred stone situated within a forest inhabited by Panjurli Daiva, a demigod responsible for safeguarding the tribal communities dwelling within the forest. In exchange for the stone, he generously donates a significant portion of his land to the tribal people. Panjurli cautions the king that it is imperative for their lineage and future generations to uphold their promises and refrain from reclaiming the territory, since doing so would provoke the wrath of Guliga Daiva, an intimidating divine being and compatriot demigod of Panjurli. Panjurli’s cautions emphasize the endeavors of tribal communities to uphold a moral principle of concern that can integrate their need for justice and compassion both among themselves and toward the natural environment. Developing ethical principles is crucial for transforming traditional beliefs, environmental thinking and community interactions to attain a higher level of “harmony with land” (Leopold 1972, p. 145; Meine 2022, p. 169). While the overarching montage establishes the narrative ambiance centered on demigods, land and tribal communities, the film’s title, translated as “mystical forest,” effectively conveys the sanctity of the land. *Kantara* is a term in the Kannada language that translates to “mysterious forest” (Fig. 1) in English, and this term refers to a forest region that is unfamiliar or uncharted, perhaps containing significant mysteries. As the director Rishab Shetty expounds on the significance of the word “*Kantara*” in an interview, stating, “‘*Kantara*’ is a mysterious forest, and this is a story that happens around the area [...]. The film title has a tagline calling it a ‘*dhanta kathe*’ or a legend. I did not want to give the film a straight or direct title. The word is not used often. While it has Sanskrit origins, it is used in Kannada too. It is used in Yakshagana [a theatrical dance-art form famously performed in Coastal Karnataka in India] too, where we call a very mysterious forest ‘*Kantara*’” (Mubarak 2022).



Fig. 1 A view of the mysterious forest (Shetty 2022)

The mystical forest holds significant importance for tribal communities as it serves as an integral component of their existence, cultural heritage and economic sustenance, hence playing a crucial role in their overall survival. In the village of Kaadubettu, they do not perceive “land” or nature as personal property, a tradable commodity or a resource for financial gain. In these circumstances, the preservation of relationships, the establishment of a connection with nature and the concept of “land” are not contingent upon physical access to a specific geographical location. Rather, they involve figurative or sacred illustrations and spiritual connections with more encompassing and universal concepts such as “Mother Earth” (Kermoal and Altamirano-Jiménez 2016; Wood et al. 2018). The forest in which these tribal people reside becomes an integral part of the nation, indistinguishable from their cultural and spiritual identity. Moreover, the utilization of land and resources serves as the fundamental basis upon which these communities construct and reconstruct their economic systems, thereby promoting self-governance, autonomy, welfare and the socio-economic conditions of their populations. In turn, this place transforms into what is referred to as their “territories of life,” a conceptual framework that signifies the profound connection indigenous communities have with their ancestral territories. According to Zanjani et al. (2023, p. 2),

for the custodians of such ‘territories of life’, the connection between their community and territory is much richer than any single word or phrase can express. It is a bond of livelihood, energy and health. It is a source of identity and culture, autonomy and freedom. It is a link among generations, preserving memories from the past and connecting to the desired future. It is the ground on which communities learn, identify values and develop relationships and self-rule. For many, it is also a connection between visible and invisible realities, material and spiritual wealth. With territory and nature go community life and dignity, and self-determination as peoples.



Fig. 2 Panjurli communicates with the king through Shiva’s father (Shetty 2022)

The film effectively portrays the profound symbolism of interconnectedness between visible and invisible reality, as well as cultural and spiritual richness, through the prominent utilization of the Bhoota Kola, a performative ritual that holds significant prevalence among the Adivasi or indigenous communities residing along the coastal region of southern Karnataka. This captivating ritualistic performance is a distinctive amalgamation of dance, music and drama, which has its origins in old folklore and spiritual convictions, serves to emphasize the Tulu heritage of invoking spirits and delves into its historical and cultural implications. The Bhoota Kola, also referred to as ‘Bhootaradhana,’ is a ritualistic practice that combines spirit worship with shamanistic dance performances. The term “Bhoota” signifies a spirit or demigod, while “aradhana” denotes the act of worship. The ritual encompasses the act of calling and propitiating a diverse array of spirits or demigods, commonly referred to as bhootas, which are thought to possess the ability to exert influence over human existence, hence bestowing both favorable outcomes and adversities. The communities of this particular region frequently deviate from mainstream Hindu rituals and formal norms pertaining to ritual purity and Brahmanical norms in the context of Bhoota Kola. Instead, they adhere to folk or local belief systems that are specific to their respective groups (Vineeta 2023; Baidur 2019, p. 397).

The first manifestation of shamanism in the film occurs when the demigod Panjurli communicates with the king by means of Shiva’s father (Fig. 2) and makes an agreement

wherein the king is promised peace, wealth and happiness in return for granting land to the tribal people.

In this particular context, it is apparent that shamanism is a localized practice, characterized by its cultural specificity and close association with a ritualistic framework (Walsh 1990, pp. 15–17). The tribal communities' profound faith and adherence to the messages of Panjurli illustrate the distinctive roles played by demigods or spirits in the regulation and utilization of natural resources. This is manifested through spiritual norms including rituals and the demarcation of sacred zones (Cox et al. 2014). The act of Panjurli also serves as a symbolic representation of the enduring connection between indigenous communities and their land, forests and natural surroundings, indicating that indigeneity can be understood as a harmonious integration between “indigenous peoples” and their “local ecosystems” (Durie 2004). The second embodiment of shamanism is exemplified during the Bhoota Kala ritual, wherein the demigod Panjurli establishes communication through the intermediary of Shiva's father, the Bhoota Kala performer, with the descendant of the king who seeks the return of their ancestral lands. In this particular mode of invocation (Fig. 3), Shiva's father figure, adorned with intricate makeup and ornate attire, induces a state of trance, thereby facilitating a connection with Panjurli, who attends to the needs and interests of the tribal community. As Grim (1987) notes, “among tribal peoples the shaman is the person, male or female, who experiences, absorbs, and communicates a special mode of sustaining, healing power” (p. 3).



Fig. 3 The Bhoota Kola (Shetty 2022)

The descendant of the King asks Shiva's father to persuade the local inhabitants to hand over their property to him. However, Shiva's father declines the demand and warns that the descendant will suffer a fatal condition of hematemesis if he attempts to seize the territory. The descendant expresses doubt over the alleged state of being possessed by Panjurli, ascribed to Shiva's father. In response, the performer asserts that he would disappear if actually possessed, thereafter fleeing into the forest and thereby remaining unnoticed henceforth. As previously cautioned, the demise of the king's descendant occurs under enigmatic circumstances, as he succumbs to a sudden bout of hematemesis many months later while making his way to the court premises to present his case pertaining to land ownership. This incident emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and valuing other knowledge systems, as well as the necessity to take ‘native ontologies seriously’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004). Furthermore, both the instances of disappearance and demise (Fig. 4) underscore the sacredness of indigenous knowledge systems and shamanism as an “archaic technique of ecstasy,” where the shaman is seen as a psychopomp who possesses multifaceted roles as a healer, spiritual guide and artistic communicator, capable of performing extraordinary feats (Eliade 1964, p. 4).

The profound connection between individuals and their natural environment is further intensified through specific cultural celebrations and ritualistic practices. One example of a celebration is Kambala, a traditional event including an annual buffalo race that takes place in the southwestern Indian state of Karnataka. The event has historically



Fig. 4 The Bhoota Kola performer disappears and the king's descendant dies (Shetty 2022)

been supported by local Tuluva landowners and households residing in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi in Karnataka, as well as Kasaragod in Kerala. The film effectively illustrates the intricacies of Kambala through Shiva's enigmatic performance in the sport with buffaloes (Fig. 5) and his subsequent victory in the race. Additionally, the film includes detailed depictions of the meticulous attention provided by buffalo owners in the region, who ensure that their livestock are well-nourished, groomed and nurtured in preparation for participation in Kambala. These celebrations and ritualistic practices operate as impulses for the advancement in the context of constructive interactions between indigenous and capitalist modes of thought, which would establish the foundation for an ethical environment where an ecology of knowledges can flourish (Coleman 2012, p. 25).

This festival not only upholds the local culture and the tribal community but also symbolizes an effort to “reclaim their legacy and to make their local narrative against the single and unitary story produced by the state” (Prasetyo et al. 2021, p. 195). The rituals, performances and ceremonies observed in the coastal village of Kaadubettu are integral to the local community's worldviews. These practices are closely intertwined with tribe-specific creation narratives and have been transmitted and preserved primarily through “oral history, storytelling, and the local cultural traditions” (Battiste and Youngblood 2000). The legitimacy of the knowledge held by these tribal communities is determined by its geographical and ecological context, hence characterizing the knowledge of the coastal village of Kaadubettu as “place-based” (Swidrovich 2023) knowledge. Unfortunately, their “Indigenous ways of living” and “ways of being” (Aikenhead 2006) are subjected to prejudice and injustice, as discussed in the following section.



Fig. 5 Kambala and Shiva's performance (Shetty 2022)

4 Distrust and prejudice: indigenous knowledge systems and injustice

Panjurli emphasizes the importance of preserving the land distributed to tribal communities and recognizing the knowledge systems of the demigods and inhabitants of that land. However, the lack of belief and prejudiced attitudes toward this knowledge lead to both environmental and epistemic injustices. When considering this land through the perspective of Emmanuel Levinas's notion of gift-giving, one can posit that the transmission of knowledge serves as the foundation of knowledge production and dissemination: “Giving is first and foremost [...] a metaphysical act that makes possible the communication between a self and an other—as trans-ontological—as well as the sharing of a common world” (qtd in Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 258). The possibility of engaging in an open discussion of this nature is contingent upon the mutual recognition of equality between the self and the other. Both parties must perceive this conversation as a reciprocal exchange of knowledge aimed at advancing knowledge and fostering a genuine trans-ontological experience. Tribal communities in the coastal village of Kaadubettu are never allowed to engage in this kind of open conversation and reciprocity, as their traditional and ecological knowledge systems, as well as the sacredness of the stories of demigods, are never given due respect and importance.

The acceleration and magnitude of the decline of indigenous cultures experienced a significant surge with the onset of ‘Modernity’. Throughout the course of modernity, there were several significant episodes that greatly influenced the trajectory of indigenous and local knowledge. These episodes encompassed colonization, the confiscation of land, the extermination of local populations, the institution of slavery, the exploitation of cultural and natural resources, persecuting believers and the transition from a naturalistic to a mechanical worldview, which was facilitated by scientific rationalism, capitalism and the Anthropocene (Toledo 2012; Gómez-Baggethun 2022). The narrative of *Kantara*, covering the period from 1874 to 1990, effectively brings attention to the systematic erasure of “cultural and intellectual contributions inherent in these knowledge systems” (Shiva 1997, p. 1). The forest, which serves as the territory of life for the tribal people residing in the village, has been a source of dispute, contention and power dynamics between Muralidhar, a Deputy Range Forest Officer (D.R.F.O.), and Devendra Suttooru, a landlord and the king's descendant in the present.

It is worth noting that while executing night-time surveillance, two constables from Murali's team found the head ornament of the demigod Panjurli (Fig. 6). Upon presenting the artifact to Murali, they assert that the ornament



Fig. 6 The unexpected discovery of the head ornament of Panjurli (Shetty 2022)

possesses an antiquity that surpasses even the regal significance of a king's crown. The unexpected discovery of this ornament within the forest serves as a symbolic representation of the demigod's existence, a fact that Muralidhar fails to acknowledge due to his prejudiced perspective, leading to epistemic injustice toward the tribal communities. Epistemic injustice refers to the inequitable treatment experienced within knowledge-based and communicative systems, wherein the perspectives, lived experiences and concerns of marginalized individuals and communities are disregarded or undervalued. The condition pertains to instances where the intended thoughts or contributions of persons are consistently "distorted, misheard, or misrepresented, unfairly distrusted, and marginalized as a result of dysfunctional dynamics" (Fricker 2007; Kidd et al. 2017, p. 1). Murali has been assigned the responsibility of transforming the land inhabited by the people into a forest reserve, as he considers the local communities as encroachers who are causing disturbances to the ecosystem through deforestation and hunting of wildlife. While communities engage in the practice of logging and gathering natural resources for their daily sustenance and ceremonial purposes, Murali do not attach any value to these rituals. In fact, he goes as far as warning community members against the use of firecrackers during the Bhoota Kola and mocking the entire ritual: "I don't want to hear the sound of crackers again. Does your demigod dance only to the sound of crackers?" (Shetty 2022).

Epistemic injustice further occurs when Shiva intervenes and cautions Murali against making comments about Panjurli due to his lack of familiarity with the demigod's narratives, divine punishments, sacred wisdom pertaining to the forest and the community it represents. Murali retorts in a derisive manner, stating, "somebody narrated your demigod's story to your father, and he narrated it to you. You have been roaming like a nomad, narrating that story to everyone. You are jobless anyway" (Shetty 2022). Murali departs from the location, urging Shiva and others to comply

with his regulations, with the implication that failure to do so will result in the cessation of their 'silly' customary practices and festivities. Murali's cautionary statement signifies the propensity to disregard indigenous knowledge within knowledge production environments, despite its diverse and intricate nature, and this knowledge is frequently characterized using terms such as 'primitive,' 'backward,' 'savage,' 'rural' and 'unscientific' (Ezeanya-Esiobu 2019, p. 7).

The notion of epistemic injustice, in conjunction with prejudice and distrust, manifests itself in the initial sequences of the film, wherein the descendant of the king claims the land belonging to the tribal communities, disregarding the existing agreement between Panjurli and the king. Furthermore, he displays a lack of interest in participating in the Bhoota Kola ritual and dismisses the significance of these performances, as well as expressing skepticism toward the sacred stories. He even goes so far as to interrogate the performer about their authentic identity, exemplifying his distrust of shamanism. As the performer swiftly traverses into the forest, an abrupt disappearance occurs, thereby substantiating the convergence of the performer and demigod. Devendra perceives this act of disappearance as a manifestation of falsehood on the part of the performer, leading to a subsequent sense of shame and disappearance. This is how indigenous knowledge systems have been completely disregarded, with the culturally dominant being portrayed as the sole legitimate source of knowledge. According to Asante (1991), the formation of invidious divisions between dominant and dominated individuals, as well as their respective contributions (or lack thereof) to the knowledge canon, is largely based on erroneous notions.

In another incident, Devendra, motivated by his pursuit of capitalist greed, attempts to offer a bribe to Guruva, the performer of Bhoota Kola, in order to impersonate Panjurli in the approaching ritual. This act denotes Devendra's underlying objective of manipulating the communities into giving up their land, thereby exposing his true intention of taking over communal land and demonstrating a disregard and lack of faith in the revered knowledge system intertwined with the Bhoota Kola. When Guruva declines to comply, Devendra terminates his life and discards his deceased body in front of the Kola arena, and the demigod Panjurli appears in Shiva's dream with blood dripping from his eyes, symbolizing the murder of the entire chain of knowledge (Fig. 7). The subsequent imposition of Devendra's knowledge and authority upon the tribal community results in the near complete annihilation of their epistemology, a process referred to as epistemicide. As de Sousa Santos (2005 p. xviii) argues, "in the name of modern science, many alternative knowledges and sciences have been destroyed, and the social groups that used these systems to support their autonomous paths of development have been humiliated." Epistemicide has been perpetrated as a consequence of capitalist drives, with



Fig. 7 Brutality and epistemicide (Shetty 2022)

imperial powers such as Devendra resorting to this practice in order to suppress any kind of opposition among subjugated populations and societal segments. In this context, Devendra, the imperial figure, tries to establish his privileged position as the sole creator of knowledge, rejects the revered knowledge system of Guruva in general and specifically dismisses the significance of Panjurli. This deliberate act of committing murder not only constitutes a form of epistemic violence but also emphasizes that when the knowledge and understanding of oppressed individuals are silenced, it is anticipated that those who generate this knowledge should also be executed in order to effectively suppress this knowledge. As de Sousa Santos (2015) opines, “The destruction of knowledge is not an epistemological artifact without consequences. It involves the destruction of the social practices and the disqualification of the social agents that operate according to such knowledges”(p. 43). Consequently, both the knowledge framework and the individuals representing it are rendered silent.

The process of epistemicide and the “replacement of endogenous epistemologies with the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror” (Nyamnjoh 2012, p. 129) are depicted in an incremental way in the narrative. This happens through Devendra’s manipulative exploitation of Shiva’s physical prowess, simplicity and dedication to his community and land, and treacherous act of seizing the communities’ land all for his own advantage. Devendra persuades Shiva to believe that Murali is responsible for Guruva’s death, with the intention of acquiring their land, and further incites him to take action against Murali. Conversely, Murali perceives Shiva and his knowledge as a hindrance

to his task of converting the land into a reserve forest, as authorized by the state. As a result of epistemic injustice and epistemicide, the distinct knowledge and perspectives of reality generated by tribal communities residing in the coastal village of Kaadubettu through a multifaceted process of cultural construction are rendered imperceptible, marginalized and deemed an inferior social experience when compared to the dominant epistemological frameworks of Devendra and Murali that perpetuate and validate a singular “monoculture of knowledge” (Santos 2015).

5 Sacredness in the sacrifice zone: activism and justice

The territory maintained by the tribal people of Kaadubettu is characterized by a profound connection with the spiritual, personal and intellectual dimensions of their environment. This land “extends beyond a material fixed space” and is a “spiritually infused place grounded in interconnected and interdependent relationships, cultural positioning” (Styres and Zinga 2013, p. 301). The vocal expressions of the demigod, characterized by tonal fluctuations throughout the film, can be seen as intimate modes of acquiring and delivering knowledge, engaging in actions and existing, all of which stem from a profound connection with the natural environment and are about “coming into wisdom” (Simpson 2014, p. 7). But this land, along with its knowledge system and sacredness, is turned into a sacrificial zone when Devendra learns that Shiva knows his heinous activities of killing Guruva and deceiving the tribal people by every possible means to acquire the land. Through the very beginning, Shiva and other members of the community actively engage in safeguarding their land, and their activism is driven by “systemic social change”, “cultural shifts away from materialism” and “restriction of the political power” (Schmitt et al. 2019) of opposing forces like Devendra and Murali. Their everyday activism refers to the combined socio-ecological practice that involves human action and social processes occurring within a particular socio-ecological context. The objective is to establish a “secure, harmonious, and sustainable socio-ecological condition serving [the communities’] need for survival, development, and flourishing” (Xiang 2019, p. 7). These practices are exemplified by Shiva’s utilization of his connections with Devendra to designate Leela as a forest guard and contribute to the welfare of the community. Additionally, Shiva confronts Murali’s team upon their initiation of the construction of a fence along the designated forest reserve. Furthermore, Leela covertly aids Shiva and his associates by providing food and intelligence, while they assume covert identities to evade apprehension. Lastly, the entire village actively participates in opposing the violence inflicted upon them by Devendra and his subordinates. These

activisms are instances of “subaltern environmentalism” that highlights “the grassroots environmental activism of marginalized or subordinated groups such as peasants, urban slum and ghetto dwellers, farm workers, and groups oppressed for their race, ethnicity, class, or gender” (Hassaniyan 2021, p. 932).

Following Shiva’s disclosure of Devendra’s involvement in Guruva’s death, both he and Murali prioritize the greater good over their individual concerns and join hands in a concerted effort to foster unity among the entire community. Devendra and his associates engage in an act of community extermination and land appropriation by attacking the village, making the land a sacrificial zone and resulting in a fierce confrontation that culminates in the loss of life for numerous members of the tribal community. Devendra’s motive highlights that “the idea that war is associated with resources is probably as old as war itself” (Scheidel et al. 2020, p. 2). Following a near-death experience in the altercation, Shiva inadvertently strikes his head against the stone belonging to Panjurli, and in an abrupt turn of events, he undergoes a state of possession by Guliga (Fig. 8), resulting in the horrific killing of Devendra and his accomplices and reinstating justice in the village. Thus, the climax of *Kantara* effectively shows how “grassroots activism is formed and based in (and by) the communities in need of help and fights its battles there” (Egan 2002, pp. 25–26).

The manifestation of divine intervention by Panjurli is apparent through the recurring presence of the demigod in Shiva’s dreams and altered states of consciousness, taking the appearance of a Bhoota Kola performer and a wild boar. In the given context, the demigod not only encourages Shiva to safeguard the spiritual and cultural practices deeply

ingrained in the area but also to propagate the understanding of a “sacred ecology”, an integral aspect of traditional ecology that “addresses human–environment relationships in a holistic and humanistic way” (Berkes 2018, p. 19). This chain of events further demonstrates how the combination of ecological wisdom and divinity can be implemented as a guide for more effectively applying the precautionary principle. Within the context of socio-ecological practice, wisdom pertains to an individual’s capacity to both think (*sophia*) and take action (*phronesis*) in order to address and resolve issues within the intricate socio-ecological network (Xiang 2016, p. 55). Ecological wisdom, in the context of *Kantara*, refers to a distinctive kind of wisdom that focuses on combining ecological knowledge with a location-specific understanding of socio-ecological activities with the goal of achieving equilibrium between individuals and the environment (Fu et al. 2016, p. 80; Wang et al. 2016, p. 105). The ecological wisdom and harmonious coexistence are evident when, several months after the battle, Shiva performs the Bhoota Kola ritual. During this ritual, he embraces his community members, including Murali and others who are witnessing the Kola, and places their hands on his chest, symbolically pleading for the preservation of peace and harmony in the village (Fig. 9). This scene illustrates the importance of reflective socio-ecological practices as both a path to and a beneficiary of “ecophronesis,” a term coined by Wei-Ning Xiang, which is “the virtue of ecological practical wisdom. In other words, ecophronesis is a virtue at the heart of all other ecological or environmental virtues and serves as a *sine qua non* for others to work well” (Xiang 2023, pp. 1–4). The Panjurli possessed performance, featuring Shiva, is an artistic masterpiece that effectively showcases the divine power and symbolizes ecological wisdom. It promotes socio-ecological practices that involve seeking and following the correct course of action while acknowledging the limitations of human knowledge (Xiang 2014, p. 67). Within this framework, the correct course of action entails assuming the responsibility of safeguarding the sanctity of the mysterious forest upon which tribal communities depend.



Fig. 8 Divine retribution and justice (Shetty 2022)



Fig. 9 Peace, harmony and ecological wisdom (Shetty 2022)

Shiva's act of welcoming Murali, along with other police officials and administrative members of the region, emphasizes the need for elected representatives and all individuals or organizations to incorporate local knowledge, wisdom and ethical values into their decision-making process (Wang 2019, p. 30). This involves effectively applying principles such as the precautionary principle for the sustainable development of the tribal community living in the coastal village of Kaadubettu in the state of Karnataka. The sequence of events involving the community, local administration and police authorities demonstrates the principle of ecophronesis, which is the practical ecological wisdom of working for the common good for socio-ecological benefits (Heavers 2023, p. 135). Ecophronesis can develop through reflection on one's socio-ecological experiences while living in a coastal community like Kaadubettu, as shown in the film. This scene is followed by Shiva's retreat into the depths of the forest, subsequent to an encounter that appears to involve the spirit of his father. Thus, the village vividly becomes a sacrifice zone "with indigenous rituals of self-sacrifice intended to reciprocate and restore the creation community after violent ruptures" (Tinker 2008, pp. 68–70). This sacrifice zone necessitates the recognition of the social positioning of subaltern activists like Shiva, who can significantly transform environmental conflicts, necessitating an adaptation of their narratives around environmentalism.

6 *Kantara* and socio-ecological practice

The film *Kantara* effectively highlights the intricate socio-cultural and environmental aspects, emphasizing the need for Indian cinema to prioritize indigenous filmmaking that caters to indigenous communities. This approach challenges the prevailing stereotype perpetuated by mainstream films, which often depict indigenous people through a lens that reinforces preconceived notions (Basu and Tripathi 2023). The alignment of thought should be congruent with the director of Kanata, Rishab Shetty, who consistently maintains his conviction that "regional is universal," where his approach to filmmaking adopts a regional perspective with "tribal villagers" and local ecosystems" (Pradhan and Kumar 2023) in order to provide a deeper understanding of local folklore, rituals and culture. Shetty's perspective becomes epistemologically pluralistic when he asserts that *Kantara* is a cinematic creation that emanates from our native soil, originating from our ancestral traditions, encompassing narratives that have been passed down through generations yet remain unexplored and firmly embedded within our cultural fabric (Aaglave 2022). Shetty's integration of the tribal agricultural culture with the local demigods, which hold significant importance in our daily existence, enables a comprehensive narrative of the ongoing conflict between

the natural world and human civilization, hinting that "*daiva aradhane* (worship of local deities) bridges this conflict" (Sayeed 2022). This observation underscores that indigenous wisdom often stems from the spiritual bonds and responsibilities that indigenous communities maintain with the natural world. In addition, the film aims to evoke a personal connection and an emotional affinity between the audience and environmental concerns by portraying specific and localized settings, as well as relatable characters. This advocates the Indian film industry to come up with more stories that serve as case studies, offering detailed portrayals of characters and settings from a "more localised and near-term perspectives" (Wardekker and Lorenz 2019, p. 287; Bloomfield and Manktelow 2021, p. 34).

Films such as *Kantara* within the domain of socio-ecological practice serve as examples of environmental activism and ecological wisdom, illustrating how acquiring indigenous knowledge can enable individuals to acknowledge the profound interdependence between humans and nature and foster the understanding that knowledge is context-specific rather than universally applicable. *Kantara* is a call for the "ecologies of knowledges" (de Sousa Santos 2007) to enable the recognition of everyone and the reconstitution of marginalized and suppressed knowledge in postcolonial India, aiming to dismantle barriers and bridge deep divisions. *Kantara*, in this context, emphasizes that "the margin be no longer margin but part and parcel of a multifaceted whole, a center of decision among other decision-making centers, an autonomous center of knowledge production among others" (Hountondji 1997, p. 36). Environmental films, such as *Kantara*, elicit a psychological attachment to nature, inspire pro-environmental behavior, facilitate the decision-making process in favor of environmental sustainability, enhance engagement in conservation and community service activities and promote awareness and active involvement in addressing environmental issues.

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