

## **Exploring *Kantara's* Pan-India Connect – How Regional Cinema Touched a Chord and Enthralled Audiences, Nationally**

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**ABSTRACT**-The real-life success story of Kannada film, *Kantara*, is right out of a fiction film. Made by Rishab Shetty, known mainly within the South Indian film circuit, the film had a plot revolving around the local tradition of coastal Karnataka – *bhootha kola* – where the performer invokes the local deity and becomes the medium between man and God. Mounted on a modest budget of 16 crore, *Kantara* came out of nowhere to smash records and rake in over 400 crore, worldwide, becoming the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest grossing Indian film of 2022. Not only did *Kantara* have Kannada audiences cheering in the aisles, the strong word of mouth resulted in film lovers across languages and regions – Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and North India – flocking to the theatres, with the film being dubbed in multiple languages. This paper tries to analyse reasons behind the mind-boggling national popularity of *Kantara*. Data from both primary and secondary research have been used. Primary data includes a survey. Secondary data includes articles, statistics and interviews connected to the film. The author attempts to decode how a film with the entirely regional theme of *bhootha aradhane* resonated strongly with audiences pan-India to shine light on Kannada cinema.

**KEYWORDS**-Audience Connect, *Bhootha Kola*, Kannada, *Kantara*, Pan-India, Regional Media.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Even though the Kannada film industry has had a rich history of path-breaking films for several decades since the first Kannada talkie, *Sati Sulochana*, released in 1934, few Kannada films have become part of conversations across India. (Kodur, S. 2021). In fact, most Hindi-speaking filmmakers, and audiences, for the longest time, didn't even know the correct pronunciation of the word 'Kannada', often referring to it as 'Kannad'. (Kumar, M. 2022). The first pan-India Kannada film was *Mahishasura Mardini*, released in 1959, starring Kannada icon, Dr.Rajkumar. This was dubbed in 8 different languages. ("Did you know?" Feb 2021). Even though Kannada cinema kept making good films and had their own superstars, not many films managed to cross the region and connect nationally with audiences. But with *KGF: Chapter 1*, the tide finally turned for the Kannada film industry, in 2018. When the film released, its lead actor, Yash, went on a pan-India tour to promote the film. The stupendous success of *KGF*, finally put the Kannada film industry in the national spotlight. Four years later, 2022 turned out to be the year of Kannada cinema, with 5 films – *KGF: Chapter 2*, *Kantara*, *James*, *777 Charlie* and *Vikrant Rona*, crossing the Rs 100 crore mark, worldwide. ("With *Kantara*," Dec 2022).

*Kantara*, a local story set in coastal Karnataka made on a modest budget of Rs 16 crore came out of nowhere to become a blockbuster hit grossing over Rs 400 crore worldwide. (Suri, R. 2022). Initially released in Kannada, the massive word of mouth resulted in audiences flocking to the theatres, prompting the producers to dub it in multiple languages – Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Tulu. It has currently been dubbed in English to cater to an international audience. In Karnataka, alone, the film pulled in 1 crore viewers in theatres, setting a record. ("Rishab Shetty's *Kantara*," Nov 2022). Before *Kantara*, the film's actor/director, Rishab Shetty, was little known outside the Kannada circuit and most of the cast had a regional presence. The plot was a simple story which revolved around the local practice of *bhoota aradhane* or deity worship practised around coastal Karnataka. There were no 'masala' elements or gimmicks to cater to the masses. Despite having such a strong regional spirit,

*Kantara* arrived quietly and literally knocked the breath out of viewers in cinema halls across the country. It then continued weaving its magic on OTT.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Indian Oral Storytelling Tradition

*Kantara* begins with a man telling a child a story – about a king who had all the riches and comforts, but was still unhappy. The child listens in rapt attention. The film comes full circle with the child asking the man a question in its final scene. The oral storytelling tradition has been a very strong part of Indian culture. Most Indians have grown up listening to folk tales, myths and legends which have been passed down generations. *Panchatantra Tales*, *Jataka Tales*, our mythological stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *Akbar and Birbal* Fables, and *Vikram-Betal* have been the fondest part of the Indian childhood.

### 2.2 The Age-Old Theme of Wise Conduct and Being Righteous

The original *Panchatantra* was written by a Hindu scholar, Pandit Vishnu Sharma, as early as 200 BC (Chandiramani, 1991) and is based on *nitishashtra* which in Sanskrit translates to 'A book of wise conduct in life'. The stories, therefore, educate the reader on themes like choosing trustworthy friends, problem-solving through wisdom, understanding people, and living in harmony despite life's deceits and challenges. (Chandiramani, 1991). The ancient stories have moral themes which we can relate to, even in the present day. In *Kantara*, the king promises the local spirit that he would give a part of his kingdom to the tribals living on his land, in return for his peace of mind. When the king's descendants go back on the king's promise, nature takes revenge on them.

### 2.3 Simple Plot of Conflict and Contrasts

Roy, L. D. (2022) explains how the essential theme of conflict in *Kantara* (man versus nature, zamindar versus villagers) has connected with audiences. The other strong conflict theme in the film is the haves versus have-nots. The opulence of the clothing, food, dwelling and lifestyle of the feudal lord is a sharp contrast to the hand-to-mouth existence of the villagers. The director subliminally showcases the theme of depravity, gluttony, greed and overindulgence in the film.

There is a huge mansion and tables overflowing with food, for a family of 3.

#### 2.4 Going Back to the Roots - Ancient Traditions, Folklore and Rustic Locations

The audience seems to have bonded with the village life and traditions in the film. (Roy, L. D. 2022). The *bhoota kola*, *Kambala* or bullfight sequence, the simple everyday routine of a sleepy village, the innocence of the villagers – have all seemed to find a connect with the audience. *Kantara* did not have any of the formula of usual ‘masala’ entertainers which usually has mass appeal. This was a simple local tale, based on an ancient tradition of *bhoota aradhane* (prayer to the local spirit) recounted through characters based on people in rural communities/small villages. Rishab Shetty has mentioned that sticking to his roots and telling local stories is what has made *Kantara* succeed. (“With *Kantara*,” 2022).

#### 2.5 Supernatural Weaved in Seamlessly in the Plot to Be Engaging

The main storyline of *Kantara* revolves around *bhoota aradhane*, which is set both, as the hook at the beginning, and the climax at the end, of the film. It has been shot, edited, and set to music which puts the audience into an almost trance-like state. *Bhoota kola* is performed by local communities of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts. A trained person who is highly respected and feared in the community performs the *kola*, acting as the oracle. Face painted, and dressed in an elaborate ensemble, the performer dances and gets into a hypnotic state, acting as a medium for the local deity/spirit or *bhoota*, answering questions and solving problems of devotees. (<https://karnatakaturism.org/>).

#### 2.6 Enchantment of the Audio-Visual Storyworld

The technical aspects of storytelling have added to the mystique of *Kantara*. The art direction, costume design, locations, cinematography, lighting and music – all do complete justice to a story that is set across 3 timelines (Khajane, M. 2022). The setting is local, but the enchantment created by the cinematic medium wraps around the viewer like a spell.

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Much has been written about *Kantara* since it released on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2022. The objective

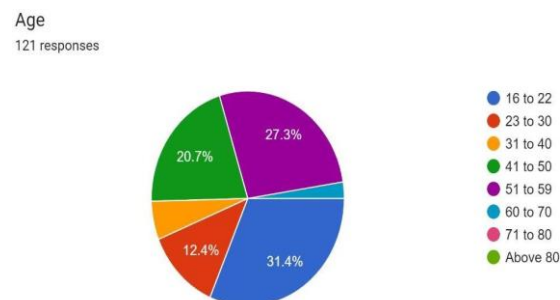
of this paper is to explore, from viewers first-hand, what made them connect so strongly with a film which revolved around a theme completely specific to a particular region.

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was sent out to 123 respondents. Purposive and Snowball Sampling methods were used. The questionnaire was designed with multiple choice questions, ticking of appropriate responses and had an open-ended question, at the end, revisiting the main research question. This was to enable respondents to express personal opinions apart from what was asked in the survey.

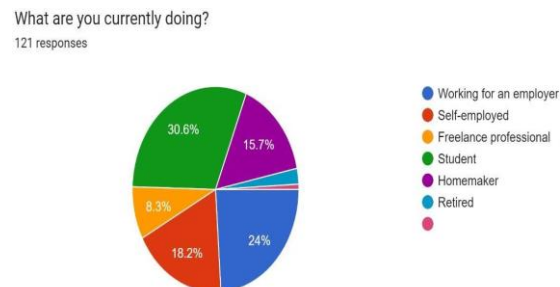
Respondents were from a diverse age range – from 16 to 22 up to the 60 to 70 years age range. Data is represented in pie chart (a)

#### (a) Age of respondents



The respondents also came from a wide variety of backgrounds and occupations. 30.6% were students, 24% were working for an employer, 18.2% were self-employed, 15.7% were homemakers, 8.3% were freelance professionals and 2.5% were retired. Data is represented in pie chart (b)

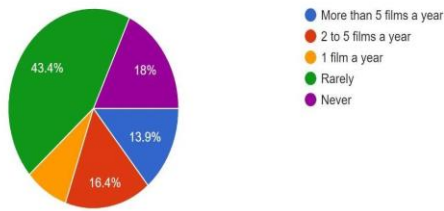
#### (b) What are the respondents doing currently?



### 5. DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data was analysed in the form of pie charts and bar graphs and the qualitative data was analysed using thematic Content Analysis.

How often do you normally watch Kannada films?  
122 responses



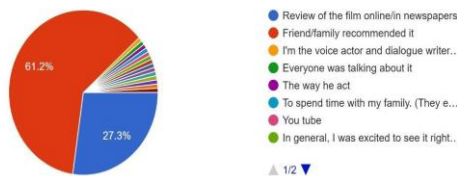
## 6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The respondents were almost unanimous in their emotional connection to *Kantara*. Some of the reasons for the connect were as follows:

### 6.1 The Kantara Movie-Watching Experience

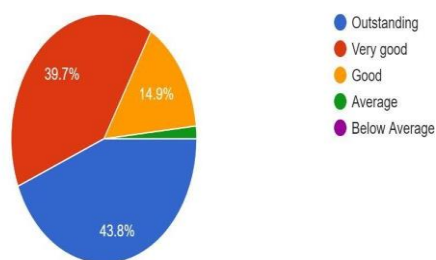
43.8% felt the experience was outstanding, 39.7% said it was very good and 14.9% felt it was good. 1.7% said it was average. Data represented in pie chart (c)

What motivated you to see Kantara?  
121 responses



### (c) Rating the Kantara movie watching experience

How would you rate the Kantara movie-watching experience?  
121 responses



### 6.2 Back to the Cinema Halls

The double assault of the Covid pandemic and the rise in popularity of the OTT platforms had left the Indian film industry struggling with drawing audiences into theatres. The movie lover had become comfortable having access to countless movies and audio-visual content at the press of a button from the comfort of their couch. *Kantara* has succeeded in drawing the cinephile to the movie halls. 54.1% of the respondents surveyed, saw the film in a theatre. 41% saw it

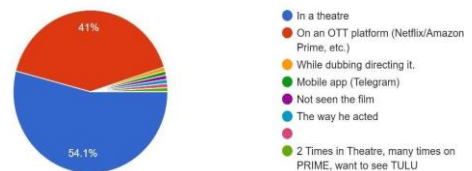
on OTT. Data represented in pie chart (d)  
(d) Where did you see Kantara?

### 6.3 What Prompted Viewers to See the Film

Word of mouth seems to be the no. 1 reason why people flocked to see *Kantara*. 61.2% saw the film because family/friends recommended it and 27.3% were motivated because of the good reviews it got. One respondent explained, "Everyone was talking about it." Data represented in pie chart (e)  
(e) Motivation to see Kantara

### 6.4 The Value of the Original Regional Language in Maximising the Movie

Where did you see Kantara?  
122 responses



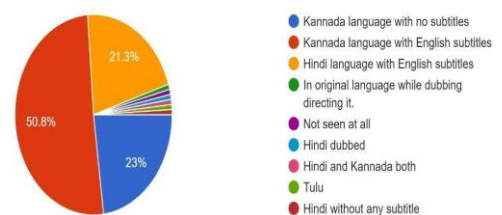
### Experience

Even though Kannada was not the mother tongue of 82.5% of the respondents, and a total of 61.4% of respondents said, normally, they 'rarely' or 'never' watched Kannada films, 50.8% of them saw the film in Kannada with English subtitles. 23% saw it in Kannada without subtitles and 21.3% saw it in Hindi with English subtitles. Data represented in pie charts (f), (g) and (h).  
(f) Kannada your mother tongue?

### (g) How often do you watch Kannada films?

Is Kannada your mother tongue?  
120 responses

Which language did you see Kantara in?  
122 responses



### (h) Which language did you see *Kantara* in?

### 6.5 The Audience Connection with Kantara

Responses to the question, ‘What made you connect with Kantara?’ were:

58.7% said the colour and magical quality of local culture like the *bhootha kola*, bull racing, etc.

57% said it was the plot rooted in local folklore.

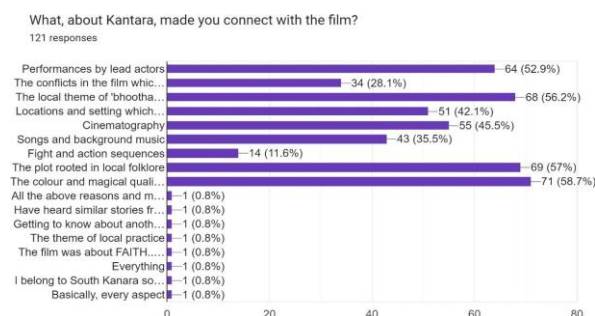
56.2% liked the local theme of *bhootha aradhane* or deity worship. 52.9% liked performances by lead actors.

45.5% were impressed with the cinematography.

42.1% felt the locations and setting had made the fictitious storyworld come alive. 35.5% admired the songs and background music.

28.1 % liked the conflicts in the film which kept the story moving forward at a fast pace. 11.6% liked the fight and action sequences.

One respondent added that the film was about faith and “irrespective of religions or the way we all worship...FAITH is what is common. So, it appealed to all.” Another said it was “getting to know another culture” that connected. Data is represented in bar graph (a)



#### (a) What made you connect with Kantara?

### 6.6 What Contributed to Kantara’s Pan-India Success

The survey had one question which was completely open-ended: “In your opinion, is there anything else, about *Kantara*, that has contributed in making it such a big hit all across India?” The respondents were very articulate. Several reasons came up. Some common reasons were:

6.6.1 Being faithful while depicting the rich local folklore of Karnataka to the rest of the country. Many Indian films twist history to suit the story, but in *Kantara*, the “originality of history” was kept intact, according to a viewer. Also, they felt the connect with roots, traditions and culture

was authentic. A respondent explained that what worked for this film was that content was targeted towards the people of the region it depicted, rather than tweaking it for a “pan-Indian audience.” Another threw light on the fact that even though this film brought out the local culture of one part of the country, all Indians could relate to it. Yet another mentioned how “hitting regionality” had worked. The basic story was local and had stayed faithful to where it was based. As one person said, many felt “*India main aisa bhi hota hai* (this too happens in India).” Yet another called it a “culturally honest film.”

### 6.6.2 The treasure trove of culture/beliefs/faith that is India

A respondent felt the film showcased “quaint customs and beliefs which adds to the richness that is India.” Another respondent had an interesting insight. She remarked that since India has rich culture with every region and language having their own folklore, “there’s already brilliant material at our disposal, courtesy of our rich history.” The makers of *Kantara* seem to have recognized this and put it to good use in the film.

### 6.6.3 The detailed presentation of an original plotline in a simple, yet unique, manner

Most movies work with themes already done before, like man versus nature or development versus preservation of tradition “but when a movie finds a new way to present that story, they tend to make a lasting impact,” explained a respondent. The “simplistic” way the story was told, worked. Also, the fact that this was not copied from anywhere, but was an “original raw and very local story” worked with masses.

### 6.6.4 The Practice of deity worship and the supernatural

Most viewers agreed that the deity worship angle to it, is what created the magic in *Kantara*. It had “an element of intrigue, paranormal n mystery which made it larger than life,” said one respondent. Before this movie, “the grandeur of the costume and the visuals of *bhootha aradhane*” and the tradition of *bhootha kola* which attracted viewers was not known to most people in India. Another explained that the “supernatural element kept the intrigue alive.”

### 6.6.5 Performances and casting

The performances and casting was on point, according to many respondents. They specially

mentioned the lead protagonist played by Rishab Shetty who was memorable. The screaming by the oracle, which was a pivotal part of the climax in the movie, didn't feel cringey; instead, it contributed to the story and "sent chills down my spine," added another.

#### **6.6.6 Pride in local customs and personal/childhood connect**

The rich folklore of the coastal Karnataka belt showcased in the movie connected well with the locals. For some, it was a connection to their childhood. For others, it was a "strong personal connection." Many were embarrassed that their knowledge of Karnataka's culture was "sadly limited to just Bangalore and its urban development." Another admitted, "By the end of the movie, I viewed my own home state of Karnataka differently. Instead of being more curious about foreign cultures, I decided to dig a little deeper into the rituals closer home and the significance of these to its inhabitants."

#### **6.6.7 Mesmerising movie-watching experience**

"The high-quality graphics and visuals coupled with the grounded nature of the setting made it a unique watching experience," explained one. Many saw the film in the theatre more than once since the theatrical experience was more impactful than OTT because of the quality of sound and the visual grandeur displayed on the big screen. One said it was made with a lot of "detailing." Another felt the cinematic experience had created a "completely new world." While one used "awestruck" to describe the movie-watching experience another said that the lighting of the film "looked like it was set in a surreal land which was still grounded to reality." The music and choreography were appreciated by viewers. "Excellent fusion music blend of traditional with modern beats," said a viewer. Respondents also praised the direction and teamwork in the film. A viewer opined that the story, locations and cinematography had ensured that "the audience were glued to their seats till the end."

#### **6.6.8 Mind-blowing climax and the strong opening hook.**

The climax of *Kantara* seems to have resonated with most viewers. One said it was the "icing on the cake" and "mind blowing," enacted to perfection by Rishabh Shetty which left an

indelible mark. Another called it "magnificent bliss." A respondent elaborated, "The first 5- 10 mins and the last 20 mins of the film – are something that most haven't experienced or have seen in a movie ever before – leaving an impression on each and every one who watched it."

#### **6.6.9 Indians driven by faith and God.**

It hits the sentiments of a typical Indian, who enjoys the good vs evil play considering we are a community that is very much driven by faith and God," explained a respondent. Another mentioned how the film had a strong underlying message, "No matter who is not there for you in life, I [god] ...will be there for you."

#### **6.6.10 Script**

The 3 timelines in the script have worked well with the audience. The "past and present is weaved together" in the film, a respondent noticed.

#### **6.6.11 Increased pride in culture/identity.**

The current climate in the country has resulted in people, after a long time, being "proud of their own folklore, traditions, and customs." *Kantara* only seems to have accentuated that.

#### **6.6.12 Younger generation's renewed interest in bhootha kola.**

The local traditions in *Kantara* seem to have had a great impact on the younger generation. "There has been a considerable increase in that age group at *nema* and *bhootha kola* functions," declared a respondent.

#### **6.6.13 Word of mouth**

Many respondents felt the movie-goers were the best brand ambassadors for *Kantara* since word of mouth has been its biggest publicity vehicle.

#### **6.6.14 People were fed up of bad films and looking for good content**

A respondent mentioned how Bollywood had, in the recent past, lost its credibility for being original, or having good scripts. This had led people to look towards regional cinema for good content. There was a "a new-found respect and eagerness to watch good cinema" which had worked in *Kantara's* favour.

#### **6.6.15 Caste politics**

*Kantara's* plot "touches upon cast politics of Karnataka" which has been another subtle layer in the film that has touched the audience.

#### **6.6.16 Fantasy which becomes reality**

A viewer noticed that *Kantara* was a film “that weaves the colours of fantasy that comes out in the end as a tapestry of realism; life is never black and white.”

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The stupendous success of a small-budget regional film has taken the country by surprise. From the findings of the survey some factors seem to be unanimous contributors to *Kantara*'s pan- India connect:

### **7.1 Regionality is Back**

In a world where people are moving towards globalisation with everything getting homogenised, the survey showed that people are now moving from broad to narrow – at the level of their roots. Local customs and traditions are being embraced. Even though the theme of man versus nature has been done countless times, telling that story via a local angle seems to have stood out. Even though 80% of the surveyors were not native Kannada speakers, and a total of over 61% said they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ watched Kannada films, 50% of the respondents preferred to see the film in Kannada with subtitles, even though there were multiple dubbed options available. This proves that viewers wanted to feel the flavour, tone and nuances of the original regional language while watching the film. Translation and dubbing cannot do justice to the regional language. So, in a sense, *Kantara*, a regional film, succeeded in created national solidarity.

### **7.2 Being faithful to local folklore while telling the story**

Telling a local story, while keeping the details of the customs, authentic, has garnered respect and admiration for the film.

### **7.3 Renewed sense of pride regarding country and culture**

There is renewed interest and pride in our nation's culture. The environment in the country is one of curiosity and excitement towards age-old traditions and customs.

### **7.4 Brilliance of cinematic craft and storytelling**

Using the brilliance of cinematic craft and storytelling to break barriers of age, location, language and occupation while bringing a local custom to the rest of the country. The medium of cinema has often been used to bring about change. The magic of the audio- visual medium

has the ability to wrap itself around the viewer in a way seldom managed by other media. In *Kantara*, the simple storytelling, action sequences, subtly introduced visual effects, mesmerising lighting and camerawork of the *bhoota aradhane* and *kola* sequences, haunting music score, crisp direction and perfectly pitched performances kept the viewer rivetted. The script across 3 timelines seemed relatable. Viewers were moved by the climax of the film which put the audience in a trance-like state, and stayed in their minds long after the film had ended. This has translated to a sparking of interest in the tradition and discussions about *bhoota kola* among people across the country. The movie experience seems to have cut through barriers of age, location and occupation to unify the viewers into loving the film. The survey showed that people from the age range of 16 to 22 up to the age range of 60 to 70 had liked the film. There was a wide variety – from professionals to self-employed to freelancers, to homemakers to retired respondents. And many non-Kannadigas preferred to watch the film in the local language. *Kantara* had acted as the national unifier.

### **7.5 Getting audiences back to the theatres through word of mouth**

61.2% of the respondents said they were motivated to watch the movie due to word of mouth from family and friends. 54.1% of those surveyed said they watched the movie in the cinema hall, some more than once. After a prolonged struggle by the film industry, due to competition from OTT, here was a film which was attracting audiences to theatres. People everywhere were talking about *Kantara* and it's mesmerising cinematic appeal, prompting audiences to flock to cinema halls instead of waiting for it to drop on OTT, because the audio-visual experience deserved a theatrical viewing.

### **7.6 Younger generation looking inwards towards rootedness.**

From being a West-obsessed generation, youngsters, today are moving towards their regions and roots. A film doesn't need big budgets and fancy effects to reach the audience. Respondents mentioned how after seeing the film they realized they knew very little of their rich local culture and folklore. They were motivated to look inwards rather than run

behind Western culture and habits. Post-Kantara there has been a renewed interest in viewing of *bhoota kolas* across Karnataka, especially with the younger generations who had lived in the state but seldom attended these events, many being totally clueless about the practice. Even small-town youngsters typically read and understood more about urban centres like Bangalore rather than their towns and villages. *Kantara* seems to have slowly ignited a change towards rootedness.

### 7.7 Indians driven by deity-worship, faith and God

In the time of technological innovations and digitisation, Indians are still rooted in the concept of deity worship and faith in a higher power. So, even though the theme of *bhoota kola* is regional, most Indians could relate to it, since at some level, many regions have customs invoking God and the supernatural.

Ultimately, what worked for *Kantara* was the fact that its spirit and soul were entirely regional in the most honest way possible, resulting in outpouring of love at the national level.

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