

## The Concept of Nationalism in Bendre

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Language has been a binding factor and also the strength of the people of a region. Thus, language provided the base for the growing nationalist movement in Karnataka in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kannada was replaced or dominated by other languages, especially the neighbouring regional ones like Marathi, Telugu. The resistance was surprisingly not much against English, the official language of the ruling class. Kannada had been reduced to a minor status in its own land. In this situation, Kannadigas were experiencing innumerable day to day problems as other languages dominated their life. Economically too, these areas remained underdeveloped, neglected and backware. Under these conditions, a feeling of discontent had started brewing among people. They felt that their interests and their language were being relegated to the background. This state of affairs created a deep urge in the kannadigas to be united politically, economically, socially, regionally and culturally.

Consequently, a movement that initially started as a protest against linguistic oppression soon morphed into that demanded a separate state to be created consolidating all Kannada-speaking regions, Thus, making the unification of Karnataka one of the major historical events in India. The Kannadigas challenged the expansionist claims of neighbouring Indian languages and strove for a regional, linguistic and cultural identity. Simultaneously, they also shared the all-India vision of the larger Indian nationalism.

Even though the movement had a political urgency, it had a cultural dimension too. Here the writers of modern Kannada literature spearheaded the movement. Thus, the success

of movement does not belong to the politicians alone. The writers aroused the emotions and ideologies of the people who were politically divided. Their writings helped the people to come out of the amnesia brought about by the colonial rule and made them conscious of their rich post.

“Where the politicians did have some confusion about this regional unity, this confusion did not exist in the writers for they had the vision of a cultural Karnataka”.

(C.R. Govinda Raju, 4)

The separated Kannadigas had to be brought together and to form an identity of their own based on their language. The people had to associate themselves with the culture and literature of the region. Already the awareness of being an Indian and at the same time of being Kannadiga had been awakened during the fight to oust the British. Thus, the consciousness about one’s own regional language had become more acute during this period. Hence, having had a simultaneous growth, there hardly existed any ideological difference between the concept of nationalism and the concept of unification based on regional languages. The latter is the link and part of the former – a small part leading to the greater whole. The process of finding one’s identity goes through many stages, and regionalism is one such step of identification in the greater concept of Indianness. So, the two – regionalism and nationalism – are not contradictory. In fact, they complement each other.

The intensity of the unification movement was seen in Northern Karnataka. The loss of identity was felt more intensely in this region where Marathi was the dominant language. Naturally, the seeds of the Ekikaran movement and all its most important protagonists including Alur Venkat Rao were from Northern Karnataka. Therefore, Dharwad became the centre. One of the earliest and the most important organizations that spearheaded the entire movement, the Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha took birth in Dharwad. So too, the Geleyar

Gumpu (the friends' Association) formed there, led by Bendre was an effective arm of the movement. Thus, the contribution of North Karnataka towards the unification of Karnataka is indeed vital.

Bendre's writings vehemently echo the need of unity of regional language, unity of local culture and regional history. He became the representative voice of North Karnataka as his ideas about Kannada language and Karnataka and the need for unification were the unspoken, repressed feelings of the people of Northern Karnataka. Bendre's writings touched the chords of people's heart. To discern his line of thought an analysis has to be made of his pivotal role in the unification movement and of his works on this movement. These will eventually help to understand his concept of nationalism.

That Bendre played a pivotal role in the unification of Karnataka is unquestionable. His 'Geleyar Gumpu' (Friend's circle) played a vital role in the renaissance movement in Karnataka in 1923.2 (Amur, 11). The members of this group who were inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo, shared a common goal. This association was dedicated to the cultural awakening of Karnataka and the struggle for national freedom. Its membership consisted primarily of V.K. Gokak, R.S. Mugali Madhurachanna, Betgeri Krishna Sharma, etc. Its major task was to make Kannada literature reach the common man. The group was first to organize Nadahabba (regional festival), which became an important cultural activity. It ran journals like 'Swadharna' and 'Jaya Karnataka' and launched the Jaya Karnataka Granthamala, which brought out the first anthology of Kannada folk poetry. Its ideal was to unify Karnataka politically as well as psychologically. It was a Herculean task and was inspired by Aluru Venkata Rao and others.

With the advent of nationalism, the people started gaining an identity based on a common culture, which cascaded into identities based on religion, caste, region and languages. This also brought about a change in literature. In the new form of literature, one

could find a sensitivity of expression and a very vigilant secular language. During the colonial rule, the western ideas had been absorbed and assimilated into regional literature. These greatly influenced the thought process of the people of Navodaya period- a period that coincided with the national freedom and regional unification. Thus, the literature of that time reflected the ideologies of the movement.

Though the movement's main concern was the regional language and the main resistance was against certain neighbours who were described as 'foreigners'; it was not based on narrow parochialism. To the Kannada intelligentsia taking up the Kannada issue was as natural as identifying with the larger Indian issues. This participation on national level could be seen after the formation of Indian National Congress in 1885, when the local intelligentsia attended its annual sessions and propagated the Congress ideas in Karnataka.

#### **Bendre as a Kannadiga and a Nationalist:**

Against the background of this political and literary setup, Bendre's role is considered pivotal in the movement for unification of Karnataka. To him the development of language was an inseparable component of broader nationalist scheme of nation forming. He was convinced that the larger Indian Nationalism did not pose any threat to the sustenance of the local identity. Indian Nationalism and other related issues formed integral parts along with the Kannada issues in his scheme of world development and its process.

In Kurtkoti's words, "Bendre loves to talk about the relation of his own individual self with the world around him and proves in various ways, that a poet has certain obligations to the world in which he lives and he ought to fulfil them through his poetry."<sup>3</sup> (p.1)

Bendre appeared on the Kannada poetic scene when the condition of Kannada language was in bad shape. When he started his poetic career, Karnataka had not yet got a political boundary. The aim of the regional linguistic revival was not to defy the national



framework, but only to demand certain internal rearrangements within that system. There was no conflict between nationalism and linguistic regionalism. Neither were there any conflicts at the political and the literary levels. Bendre and his work are a paradigm of this process. 4 (K. Raghavendra Rao, 5)

Bendre was instinctively both native and national. Though nationalism was a political phenomenon, it had its literary dimension too. In literature, it meant a need to assert the poet's links with his indigenous, national past. This explains why Bendre turned towards Tagore for inspiration. He acknowledged Tagore as his Gurudev. Bendre introduced many Indian characteristics like the ideal of renunciation, the mystic yearning to be absorbed with the absolute and the aggressive tone of patriotism concerning the country as a whole or one's own region as its integral part. 5 (Chennaveera Kanavi and Raghavendra Rao, p.xvii).

Bendre deals with regional and national themes in many of his poems. The identity of the nation is most often symbolized by a figure or an image. This helps to create an image with which people can identify the nation. In 20<sup>th</sup> century with the growth of nationalism, the identity of India came to be visually associated with the image of 'Bharatamata'. Devotion to this mother figure came to be seem as evidence of one's nationalism. Bendre's "Kannada Kandavvan Lali" (Lullaby for Kannada baby) is a song sung by Mother India for her Kannada daughter. Here Karnataka is being lauded as the daughter of Mother India. The bond between mother and daughter is celebrated. This "is indicative of the national perspective hwerein the poet visualized regional identity".<sup>6</sup> (Amur, 27) The mother-daughter bond is highlighted and extended as a representation of bond between the mother and daughters of the nation. Along with the notion of sacredness of the mother – daughter bond emerged the concept of interdependence and the sense of responsibility to defend the sanctity of the nation. He felt that to free India at was necessary that each of her constituents should be unified and that each one had to be individually strong. Thus, he envisioned a strong group of

Marathis, of Telugus, along with a strong group of Kannadigas. All these groups were to him the siblings of the same mother with their own names and identities and together they would forge a strong family bonding.

For example, the poem “Keli Nudi” shows the sibling relationship

To the north is Marathi

To the east Telegu

To the south is Malayalam

And to the west Konkani, Coorgi and Tulu

But Kannada is the Jewel in the crown

For Bendre, Dharwad is the microcosm of India. His intense feelings about this place are concentric; they spread out to encompass Karnataka and then widen to encompass the nation too. In his poem “Dharwad Tayi” he expresses his feelings about how Dharwad forms an important, integral part of his motherland’s pride and honour.

Karnataka is mirrored in his image of Dharwad; he saw Karnataka through Dharwad. It was a focal point to invoke the feelings of unification in Kannadigas. Similarly, the glory of Hampi symbolised the prosperous days of the past that were the zenith of an ideal life, as against the gloom that had enveloped the Kannadigas under the colonial rule. The Kannada mirror has been fragmented and strewn about; he writes in “Odanudi”

In order to unify the state, he had to make efforts to awaken the people who had gone into a slumber-like condition over a period of a century, having lost their identity, they were completely in disarray and disoriented. He uses his gift of powerful invoking in verse e.g. “Kannadigana Udayavani” to awaken Kannada Mother,

You are the expression of the saint,

The words of the brave,  
A source of endless knowledge,  
Why are you in slumber now,  
Awake O Mother Saraswati.

The following forceful lines are also to be found in this poem.

Enter the bosoms of the dead,  
Draw the poison that has been spread,  
fill again the dry Amrita stream;  
sow seeds of strength in plenty.  
Pull out the fear from our hearts.<sup>7</sup> (Tr.Amur,p.27)

He requests the persistent cuckoo to awaken the people and spread his message for unification of Karnataka in the poem “Kogile”

‘Tarun Tapaswi’ (Young ascetic) dramatizes the state of the ascetic’s mind. He sees himself as an agonized ascetic in a prison, and who sees a dream in which Mother India appears and fills him with courage and he is revitalized with a new determination and a new understanding of freedom.

The regional impulse can be found in ‘Kanasinologondu kanasu’ (A Dream within a dream). According to Amur, this was inspired by Anandmath <sup>8</sup> (p.75).

“If you are a man, give your life, will you?”

‘Narabali’ which was published in 1930 angered the British and Bendre was sent to jail.

In ‘Muvattamurukoti’ (Thirty-three crore), Mother India bemoans the fate of her children. Here the poet chastises Indians for lack of patriotic feelings. “In two of these, Narabali and Muvattumurukoti”, national freedom is shown as an act of religious self-sacrifice, a process by which self-suffering becomes self-strength. Here one can see the articulation of a peculiarly Indian version of nationalism – drawn from the ideas of Gandhiji and Aurobindo.”<sup>9</sup> (K.Raghavendrarao, p.21)

In ‘330000000’ Bendre sounds frustrated and vents out his feelings vehemently. Here his national fervour ends in anger at the 33 crore Indians who seem to be in slumber.

To conclude, the works of Bendre were both a product of and a contributor to national consciousness. Bendre used religious symbols like deifying the nation to evoke national awakening. To Bendre nation was never enigmatic. Bendre accepted nation as a valid category like all ‘Navodaya’ writers. To him the country was ‘Bharat Mata’ and Karnataka her daughter.

Bendre talks of spiritual nationalism. To him nation is a category of people, of different kinds of people. He felt no need to discuss it explicitly. The question of India as a nation was never debatable to him, for him it just existed. It never posed any intellectual problem. Bendre may discuss nationalities but not nation. Nationalities (regions) may combine to form a nation.

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