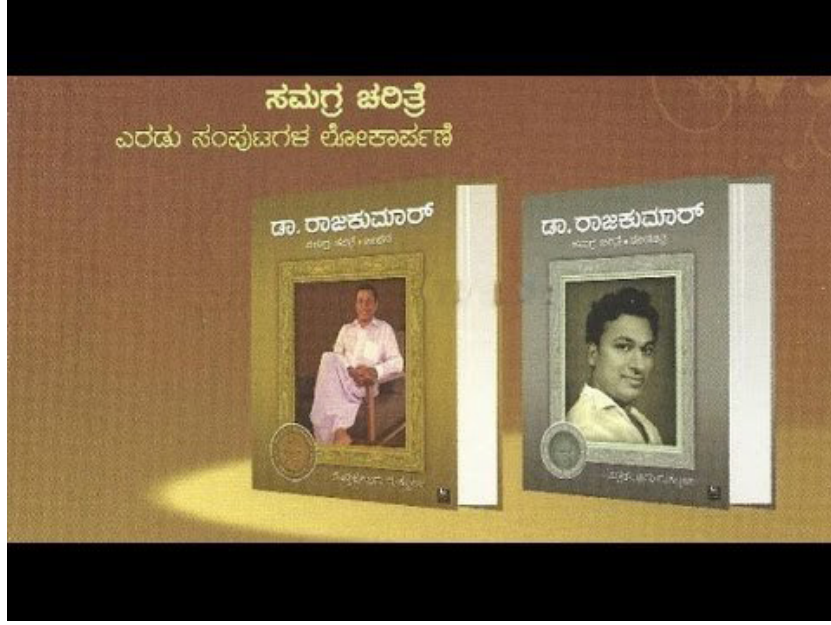


## An Experiment in Methodology



*The following article is an overall review of the book Dr Rajakumar - Samagra Charitre, a voluminous biography of the iconic Kannada Film and theatre actor. Published in two volumes, It has taken the author 15 years of hard work to put together the 2,148 pages and 8730 Photos. The book in Kannada is available at Amazon.in at a cost of Rs. 10,499/-.*

*Nearly 3000 copies have been sold so far.*

Doddahullur Rukkoji, Author, Film Journalist and researcher has recorded, compiled and published a voluminous work in two thick volumes the life and achievements of the iconic Actor of the Kannada Cinema Dr. Rajkumar placing it within a larger framework of the historical, social and cultural context of Karnataka. It won him the prestigious National Award for best book on cinema a couple of years back. The basic presumption is that it is a wholesome biography of an Artist. But the nomenclature of the work as a “Biographical” form could be contested from the notions of

modern Biographical writings as a Literary Form as in this particular work there is neither a subjective intervention by the biographer nor there is the burden multiple perspectives of critiquing the life, oeuvre and times of the artist. The entire work is so structured that it deliberately evolves in an ideologically neutral narrative. The context of the work being a record of not only the individual life and achievements but also a conscious attempt to present the history of the land, culture, politics, Society and more particularly the professional and familial background of the person also challenges the normative definition of a biography. But if one looks at it as an experiment in biographical methodology of the author and that it has an Indian tradition behind it, the work is indeed a biography of Dr. Rajkumar. The traditional methodology with a modern technical value “Big Data” inspiring the author will surely generate more interest in this experiment in the years to come. Whether such works would become an accepted literary form for art studies than cultural studies,

time only will decide.

What then constitutes a biography in modern literary parlance? The most referred to major lexicons from Cambridge and Oxford publications define biography as “The life story of a person written by someone else” and “A written record of the life of an individual” respectively. The key word in either case is “Life of an individual”. But the Cambridge version adds the word “story” to it which apparently suggests literary expectation from the works categorised as biography. In etymological terms the word has its origin in two separate words of medieval Greek “Bios” meaning life and “Graphia”, the writing of it. The modern usage develops more definitively from the late 17th century French word “Biographie” and modern Latin word “Biographia”. It is not that the biographical writings were not existent before that time but the extensive usage of it as a literary form is prevalent from the 18th century. In fact, the last century has shown an abundant output of biographies of Artists, Celebrities, Sportspersons, Social and Political activists and even commoners. Its transliterations and trans creations have spread to other forms as well with visual documentations through cinema, television and other new media proliferating to the extent of ad nauseam. There is now a thin line between the story of an individual and the story of a society and this has led to new genres of biographies and auto biographies. Recently in Kannada literary scenario, well known author Dr. K. Satyanarayana has narrated his lived experiences in cryptic chapters within a framework of external detailing of society rather than his internal world and personal details which moves away from a traditional auto biography and comes closer to fiction. There have been fictionalised biographical writings and films as well in almost all major film making countries and languages. There are also the combinations of literary and visual forms with illustrations of Art and photographs being interspersed with

words. Rukkoji’s work comes close to this genre as it includes large number of still photographs and designed to highlight the visual memory of a culture with specific focus on the individual.

India has a long tradition of recording the distinctive metaphorical characteristics of the idea of the God’s persona which manifests of various elements of nature and also the life history of incarnations of gods as mortal beings, albeit more in the oral tradition. One of the earliest texts that is still widely heard, read, revered as a religious text, looked up as a political narrative and discussed in intellectual forums is the mythological work “Ramayana”, the story of Rama. Narrated by the sage Valmiki, supposed to have been popularised in the audio-visual form of dance drama by Rama’s children themselves, by its name itself literally a biography. But it is not just a story of life of one individual Rama. It is also the story of Ayodhya, the land, the genealogy of kings who ruled it, his wife Sita, kith and kin, friends, admirers, adversaries and many more; yet it is Ramayana.

Rukkoji’s methodology belongs to this tradition. The opening sentence of his book reads somewhat like this in English: “It is imperative and essential for the structure of this book to review in brief, the political tradition and cultural background of the state of Karnataka”. For him, Dr. Rajkumar grew up with a sense of history. Though Karnataka was not a politically unified State till the middle of the last Century Dr. Rajkumar’s personality flowered through his cognitive understanding of the History, tradition and culture of the Kannada linguistic community. Rukkoji goes on to add that “Dr. Rajkumar showed through his life that man and his kinship are served and protected by spirituality and ethical values”. It was therefore absolutely inevitable for Rukkoji to present the Natural, traditional, historical and cultural context of his subject.

Rukkoji clearly states reasons for his choice of methodology in the next few sentences. For him structuring the biography of an individual through historicity in preference to viewing the history of a society and state through the lives and achievements of its protagonists is more objective. The life and its stated achievements are temporal and exists in metaphorical and physical sensibilities and naturally therefore is very subjective. But for him the metaphysical and abstractions of the symbols of life go beyond the physical existence. It lives in the collective memory of a culture. Dr. Rajkumar belongs to an age where the whole world is conceptualised as a global village and interconnected in space and time and worked as an artist in a modern technologically driven new form Cinema, which is basically a western world creation but practiced in a regional perspective. The idea of his tradition as a plural culture of languages, spirituality, lifestyle is very relevant for the biographer. Rukkoji therefore approaches his subject through the Rubicon of history of Literature, Folklore, Music, Dance, Art and Architecture of the region. In fact, Cinema being a composite form of all these elements demands a fair understanding of the Cultural tradition for its communication techniques, particularly for its performing artists and the script writers.

Two thousand years of political history of the Kannada linguistic group is followed by a brief record of evolution of Karnataka as a State in modern times in terms of its societal changes and artistic expressions, which subsequently becomes the “Play” ground for Dr. Rajkumar and his generation of artists for creation, communication and popularity. Rukkoji then zooms in on the history of Kannada theatre of the last two centuries wherein the Art traditions transit for modern performing visual arts. Since Cinema in India is deemed as an extension of visual perform-

ing arts which heavily rely on history and mythologies, almost all the filmmakers and artists started their career in Theatre in its early days. In fact, the trend continues to this day with most of the artists crediting their success to their theatre backgrounds. It was therefore natural for Dr. Rajkumar to be part of that theatre tradition and Rukkoji to highlight the domain. Here again the biographer chooses the methodology of objective reality. His subject is not at the centre of the historical record but a part of it. He brings into limelight any number of theatre groups, personalities, texts and places of performances that dotted the canvas of Kannada theatre.

Dr. Rajkumar had always maintained that for him the Film Producers are his “Bread givers (Annadataru)” and his Admirers/Fans as “Gods (Abhimani Devathegalu)”. Unlike Literature and other Fine Arts, “Audience” has been the life sustaining force for all performing Arts and artists were “Down to Earth” characters outside their performances. This notion of “Admiring Gods” is also derived from the theatre background as can be concluded from Rukkoji’s records. The professional theatre groups in the early part of the last century depended entirely on the patronage of the people (the admirers) and the artists were completely dependent on the owners of the groups (Producers) for their life sustenance. There is an interesting contrast to this relationship between the Artists and the connoisseurs in painting and sculpture domains of the ancient Roman, Greek and Egyptian civilisations. In the history of western Art, the earliest written references that name specific artists have a mythical character. They associated artists with “Gods”, the former making lifelike figures and the latter creating life itself. Writing about Biography and Autobiography in her book “Methodologies of Art” Art historian Laurie Schneider Adams points out that the God’s role as the supreme artist is illustrated in a thirteenth century manuscript

illumination where he is shown drawing the universe with a compass. This image for her reflects the biographical convention that art is divinely inspired and the artist has a divine or noble origin. She exemplifies with the story of the Egyptian architect Imhotep credited with the origin and design of monumental stone architecture, Pyramid who was later deified and made into a “God” and worshipped. The general perception and adoration of film fans towards their star icons of cinema may have originated in this idea of an Artist as God and this has led to building temples and memorial statues for them. Rukkoji’s narrative takes note of both traditions, believing in divine inspiration for creative expression but rooted in the reality as also perceiving the artist as associated with “God”.

Rukkoji’s record of details of the genealogy, family circumstances and relationships of Dr. Rajkumar creates an aura of a noble origin for the artist. The nobility is derivative of his chronological narration of the forefathers’ origins, lifestyles, native wisdom and their involvement in the community cultural ethos rather than any formal education. The choice of The faithful adherence to the traditional, familial and cultural values, the selflessness of persons around him, the commitment to each other and their professions are narrated warmly. Rukkoji’s work from then on gets focussed on to the modern biographical mode listing out the family and cultural circumstances and the achievements of the Actor in various domains. From childhood days growing into the theatre environment of which his father was an integral part, entering the new big world of cinema, struggling therein, partaking along with other luminaries of literature and activists of Kannada culture in building an abridged version of the history of Karnataka through his varied roles in cinema and his foray into the world of film music, devotional songs as a singer are all portrayed in all its details. The simultaneous growth in his personality as an avid believer in divinity, spirituality and the body as a means to achieve

the ultimate surrender to the infinite through yoga have also been graphically recorded.

The evolution of the mind and body within and without of an individual who is always in the public eye leads to an enormous impact on the society thereby creating a whole lot of admirers and followers and cinema being a commercial enterprise also demands socio economic activism. Rukkoji researches on these areas of his personality as well while discussing the fan clubs and institutions his family built in the domains of film production, distribution and exhibition. The socio cultural role outside the film acting domain inevitably made Dr. Rajkumar the unquestioned leader of all socio cultural movements in Karnataka and he willingly accepted the activist role, particularly in establishing the primacy status for Kannada language in Education and administration, seeking share of water resources for the people of the state. This activist role put him in a vulnerable state of personal security and the worst happened when he was abducted by a forest brigand. Though all these issues are of common public knowledge the biography by Rukkoji puts into historical record a view from the cultural and individual perspective narrated in a non-political tone of equanimity and understanding.

But throughout this narrative Rukkoji never deviates from his methodology of recording the changes happening around him as well in terms of paradigmatic changes happening in all field of human activities from art, education and society. Cinema as a media is one of the windows to the modern world of science, technology and lifestyles and therefore in an Indian context wherein states were created on linguistic basis new identities evolved through language cinemas and specifically through some iconic film personalities. One cannot miss this hidden detail in the Rukkoji’s work.

Conclusion: India, though an evolved knowledge society is essentially behind the modern

idea of advancement. The western world has the grip on the modern global civilisation for over five centuries now with its Scienticism, thoughts on rationality, logic and reason, applied materialism etc. These are further facilitated by meticulous documentations and critical discourses on all aspects of human activity from Arts, Science, Philosophy and what not as physical records. This is one area which has hindered the growth and status of ancient civilisation like ours which is essentially a civilisation of oral culture and tradition. In this background the documentation by Rukkoji, though of an individual actor in a regional language cinema is a very significant step towards course correction.

There are certain issues that needs to be addressed beyond this voluminous work of Rukkoji. He does not dwell much upon the medium of cinema itself, the origin, nature, aesthetics and its impact on society. Being simultaneously a technological tool, mass media, cultural phenomenon, mode of personal artistic expression and also a vehicle of economic growth it is essential to understand the dynamics of its influence on politics and society. It is undeniable that the enormous impact of cinema is by virtue of its natural characteristics and strength of reaching out to a large number of people at one stroke instinctively and without intervention of any academic equipment and training. That endears it to become a community phenomenon and a receptacle for collective memory than any other medium and

that in fact has made Dr.Rajkumar a cultural icon. It is therefore necessary to examine the nature of the medium that ultimately catapults the film artists into the centre stage of public discourses more commonly than leader in any other domain of human activity, sometimes even bigger than the political and religious leaderships.

The other aspect is, though Rukkoji has listed all the films of Dr. Rajkumar with brief introductions on the story, co artists and relevant anecdotes, there is no conscious effort to analyse and study them in terms of their psychological, cultural and intellectual impact. Since quite a large number of his films were taken from mythology, history, folklore, modern social novel there is a need to understand the way these entered the collective consciousness of that era which now remembers his film very nostalgically. This again is linked to not dwelling upon the film aesthetics, critical outlook towards independent works as fundamental tools of understanding a medium. Of course, the methodology of Rukkoji which essentially is focussing on the creation of records for the future excludes the critical analytical framework. Nonetheless this large body of research and record would definitely lead to further interest in the life and works of Dr. Rajkumar, Kannada Culture and History of Karnataka amongst students and researchers of Cinema, Visual communications and Culture Studies.

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