

Article

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Girish Karnad: the Suave Showman



We generally relate to a person by a name, and a principal marker of identification—so and so is a poet, so and so is a teacher, so and so may be a scientist. But Amartya Sen has shown, rightly so, that under this principal marker a person generally possesses multiple identities that engender her ethnicity, belief system, value system, social position, educational level, professional capability, and so on.¹ We need to explore the details and nuances of these different identities, if we want to know the person well, understand her position or contribution to society. However, the problem is manifold with regard to those who are multi-faceted personalities and make important contribution to different sectors of society. Her identity consists of diverse important markers.

Take the case of Girish Karnad (1938–2019). His mother tongue was Marathi-Konkani. But he was one of the pioneers of modern Kannada drama, who evolved into one of the finest contemporary Indian playwrights. Girish began writing plays in the 1960s, and evolved a new idiom mixing history, mythology and legend, an idiom which provides new perspectives on, and insights into, contemporary events². Besides this prominent identity, Girish was a prose writer, translator of Kannada literature (especially plays) into English, public speaker, film actor, screenwriter, director, and administrator³.

And a few months before his death, Girish reminded us of an ‘other’ identity of his persona.

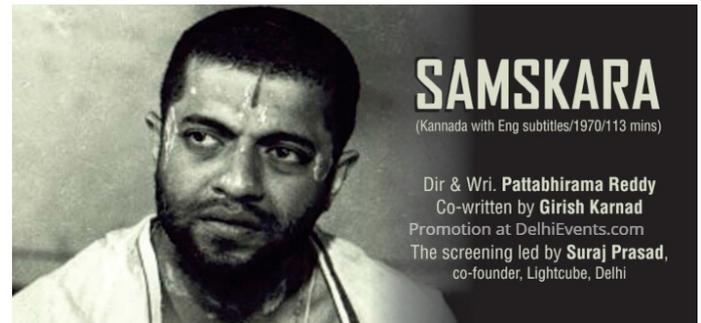
The whole country was then debating over the

implications of the Bhima-Koregaon incidents and controversies arising out of them⁴. Six prominent social workers from various parts of the country have been arrested on charges of conspiracy against the Indian state. According to investigating agencies, these people were ‘urban Naxals’ and engaged in various



conspiracies to overthrow the state power, providing left extremists with money and advice. The always overactive and super-vocal members of the right wing camps wanted these ‘urban Naxals’ to be taught lessons befitting traitors. Protests on behalf of a section of the civil society were also organized in different cities. The protesters declared that they too were ‘urban Naxals’. We saw pictures of such a meeting in the newspaper—organized in Bengaluru on the first anniversary of the ghastly murder of the journalist Gauri Lankesh⁵. And there was Girish Karnad sitting in the front row with a tube of oxygen attached to his nostrile, and a placard hanging on his chest, reading, MeTooUrbanNaxal’. Since his youth, Girish had established himself as a rationalist, humanitarian social worker not attached to any political party, though he never flaunted this aspect of his personality. However, a statement of about two hundred

prominent citizens (writers, artistes and activists) was issued before the elections to the 28th Lok Sabha, where they had urged voters not to re-elect the Hindutva party to power at the centre. Among the signatories was Girish Karnad. It is another matter that the Indian voters ignored their appeal and re-elected the very Hindutva party that they had so vehemently decried. Fortunately for himself, Girish did not have to bear that frustration for too long. Unfortunately for us, shortly after the elections got over and results declared, he passed away. After his demise, a little known fact about Girish came to the limelight. For his humanitarian ideology, his name was almost at the top of an extermination list that some extremist organization had prepared. Only because in the last few years of his life his movements were severely restricted due to his illness, the marksmen assigned to liquidate him could not reach him—as they had done in the cases of rationalists and non-conformists like Govind Pansare⁶, Narendra Dabholkar⁷, Malleshappa Madiwalappa Kalburgi⁸ and Gauri Lankesh. Girish had indeed carved for himself a niche as a socially active and articulate public person, without too much of flaunting.



But in this article I shall focus on Girish, the suave showman, who, from the 1970s to his

death after nearly five decades, was very much part and parcel of the Indian audio-visual media, namely cinema and television, both in front of the camera and behind the scenes.

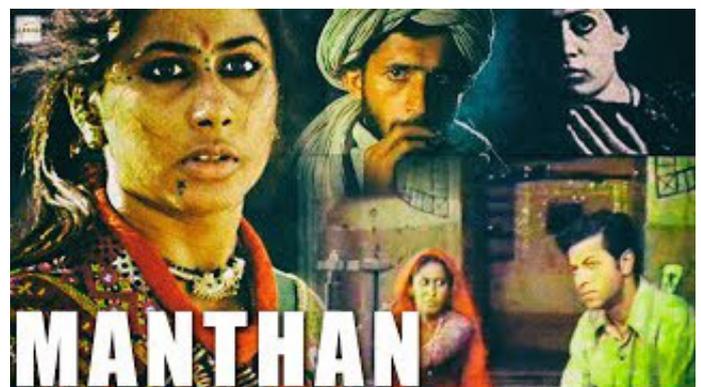


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That Girish had an undeniable screen presence and weighty screen persona evident from his very first appearance on screen. He forced no less a personality than Satyajit Ray⁹ to take note of his maiden performance to the point of drawing an unusual comparison with an accomplished and renowned international actor. In a letter dated January 24, 1972, Ray wrote to his friend Kiranmoy Raha, "...got the opportunity to see the film 'Samskara'. There are some wonderful things in it in terms of acting. Girish Karnad himself was excellent. This gentleman radiates an impression of pride and personality (*a la* Max von Sydow¹⁰), which is rare in Indian films. A single film is not enough to get an idea about his acting range though. Among others, some Brahmin priest types are very good, two women as well. The story is also strong—and markedly Indian. There is also the impression of seriousness everywhere in the film. However there are also some palpable weaknesses to mitigate these strong points—namely, the unbelievably

weak and erratic photography and editing (the handiwork of two Australians) and the poor screenplay. In the second half of the film almost all tension gets dissipated. Still, I would say the quality of the film is noteworthy—and Girish Karnad's second film is worth looking forward to."

This last sentence makes it abundantly clear that Ray had noted with interest the arrival of a serious and personable actor like Girish in the Indian cinema world. Perhaps Ray did not yet know that Girish had left a coveted job at the Oxford University Press, Madras, to just devote himself to writing. And he had become a professional actor on the silver screen to earn his living. Soon Ray would learn that Girish was already a cynosure of the cognoscenti and connoisseurs for his path-breaking Kannada plays, 'Yayati' (1961) and 'Tughlaq' (1964). And when one surveys Girish Karnad's filmography now, one is struck by the prophetic nature of Ray's assessment—who in those early days of Karnad's career could foresee his potential. Indeed, the roles he essayed over his long career almost matched those of Sydow's in their complexity and diversity.



In fact, despite being a brilliant student, skilled

in various disciplines, a Rhodes Scholar, a skilled orator, and socially-conscious, Girish soon realized that he would not be satisfied embracing any traditional profession befitting his capabilities. Perhaps he took up the job at the OUP to buy some time for self-introspection and never meant to be tied down to it. After leaving the OUP, he wanted to do something that would stir people's minds, but in an exceptional way. Despite possessing all qualifications to become an academic, he did not confine himself within the four walls of the university, although this was one sure way to stir people's minds. But Girish eschewed the conventional route. His capability as playwright eventually brought him to the cinema. By then he had already formed a clear idea about the similarities and dissimilarities of the two mediums. He was also aware of their comparative influence and impact. He was aware that no matter how powerful his plays were as literary texts, the challenges of producing these for the stage were enormous, and the impact would be limited, not commensurate with efforts that would go into producing them. He never directed plays—not even his own plays. On his own admission he would so exhaust himself in the course of writing a play that at the end of it all he would simply plunge himself into some light work or mere reading, which was his favourite pastime since his early youth. He was inclined towards adapting well-known literary works for screenplays; he reckoned that the practical possibilities in this domain were relatively brighter—the demand for film

production being high. He felt he could even get opportunities to direct films. Otherwise, he was not averse to being engaged with the medium as an actor only. True, such a mindset was not very common in our middle class milieu, especially in view of the political situation of the 1970s—when there was a discernible tendency towards rebellion and eschewing compromise in life amongst the youth.



To some extent, Girish Karnad reminds one of Sisir Bhaduri¹¹, one of the stalwarts of Bengali stage and considered by many as the pioneer of modern stagecraft in Bengal. Bhaduri had left the so-called prestigious teaching profession and gave himself up to the theatre. That surrender was not very happy. Bhaduri also had the privilege of having regular contact with the Bengali film world, but he would always resent rendering a performance following orders from the director. Such was his self-esteem and gravity of his personality that he always preferred to be his own master, be it

on stage or on the shooting floor. He abhorred being reduced to what he had himself termed as ‘the puppet of the film director’. He left this world sooner than later. Girish, however, with his personality and perseverance, made a place for himself in the world of cinema.

We know that ‘Samskara’ (1970) was a significant representative of the second wave of alternative films that took on mainstream commercial or entertainment cinema in the country in the 1970s. A series of unconventional films were produced in diverse languages in different parts of the country in the wake of this wave—Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, Assamese, Manipur, Bengali, and even Hindi. Most of these films highlighted the social issues of specific linguistic regions—though all of these were not foregrounding the social issues, all of these did not evince the same finesse or quality, nor did all the directors share a uniform cinematic vision, much less world vision. Few of these films were released in theatres and noticed by the average audience. But such films somehow trickled down to the connoisseurs, through the film societies which were very active those days. Thanks to them, these new types of films were clustered under the label of Indian New Wave, despite their palpable diversity under the influence of the French New Wave movement.

We also know that Ray, who at one time was literally amongst the champions of the Film Society movement, did not approve of this label. He repeatedly demurred that the visions,

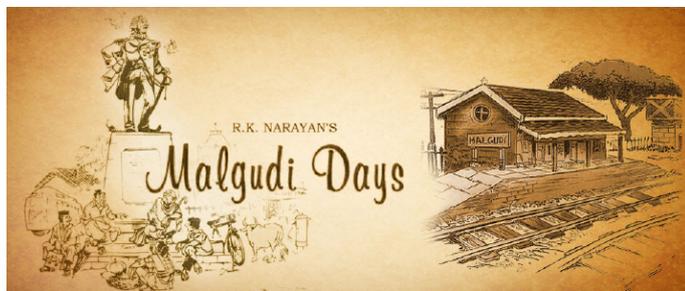
trajectories, and social perspectives of these two movements were different.



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However, in another letter of 1972, Ray wrote this to Raha, “I have learnt that Girish Karnad’s new film was doing well in Bombay, but I had not heard of anything very complimentary”. The film in question was ‘Vamshabruksha’ (1972). Girish had written its screenplay and directed it, but jointly with B. V. Karanth, another established playwright and film director¹². The film may not have been an epitome of excellence, but still shows that Girish was slowly preparing himself for a long stint in the world of cinema. The third film in Girish’s filmography, ‘Jadu ka Shankh’ (1974), was the maiden directorial effort of Sai Paranjpye¹³. It was not a very distinguished effort as cinema, yet Girish once again dished out a commendable performance in this film. When everyone was looking forward to seeing him in more films, Girish was made the Principal of the Film and Television Institute in Pune. He served the institute for two years, from January 1, 1974 till December 31, 1975. It was not the happiest of times for him. For one, he obviously did not relish administrative

works. There was another reason, though. Some of the students at the institute were older than him. He had a tough time in dealing with their ego, handling protests and facing their tantrums. After Girish's demise, Shabana Azmi¹⁴ has revealed that Nasiruddin Shah¹⁵ (b. 1950) was the main character in most of the student protests. At times Girish got involved in heated arguments with him. Still Girish recommended Nasir to Shyam Benegal¹⁶ for an important character in the latter's second film 'Nishant' (1975)¹⁷.



And something really amazing happened at this time that most people don't know about. Shyam was busy making his first film 'Ankur' in 1973. After the initial edit, Shyam realized that the film was too lengthy to sell in the market. But he had no idea how to reduce its length. Shabana revealed that Shyam had taken advice from Girish on that occasion¹⁸. She should know because she had made her debut in 'Ankur'.

After helping out Benegal in 'Ankur', Girish played important roles in the next two films of Benegal – namely 'Nishant' and 'Manthan' (1976). In fact, during this period Girish developed close friendship with Shyam. As a result of that friendship, Girish collaborated with Shyam on screenplays of 'Bhumika'

(1977) and 'Kalyug' (1981), and acted in Shyam's 'Antarnad' (1991). There cannot be any doubt about the capability and calibre of someone who can be a collaborator of Shyam Benegal.



As a result, film directors from different linguistic backgrounds have offered Girish roles in their films – people like Basu Chatterjee (b. 1930), Jabbar Patel (b. 1942), Kumar Shahani (b. 1940), Jahnu Barua (b. 1952), T. S. Nagabharana (b. 1953), Nagesh Kukunoor (b. 1967), Subhash Ghai (b. 1945), Kamal Haasan (b. 1954), Rajkumar Santoshi (b. 1956), Suresh Heblikar (b. 1948). From the list of films Girish has acted in, it appears that while in his early film days he was inclined towards the alternative genre or low budget films, he gradually overcame his ambivalence towards mainstream commercial cinema. But while shooting for these commercial films, except for the time spent before the camera he would spend the rest of the day sitting in a quiet corner engrossed in the pages of a book. Apart from acting, Girish has directed several films. Films he directed in Kannada centring on his favourite subjects include 'Vamsabruksha' (jointly with B.V. Krantha),

‘Kaadu’ (1973), ‘Tabbaliyu Ninaade Magane’ (1977, co-directed with B. V. Karanth), ‘Ondanandu Kaladalli’ (1978), ‘Cheluvi’ (1992), and ‘Kanooru Heggadithi’ (1999). Of these, ‘Tabbaliye Ninaade Magane’ and ‘Cheluvi’ were remade in Hindi, the first as ‘Godhuli’ (1977, co-directed with B. V. Karanth) and the second as ‘Cheluvi’ (1992). Girish’s skill in character building and filmic representation of events is evident in these films, which deal with the trajectory of human psyche in diverse situations. Among these, ‘Ondanandu Kaladalli’ was very much a personal favourite of Girish himself for some other reason. The film on one hand delves deep into Kannada society of the Middle Ages, juxtaposing the Brahminical hegemony with the conflicts among the people of upper castes to retain power, similar to the kind of portrayal Girish preferred in his plays. But on the other hand, he deftly exploits cinema’s liveliness, plasticity and ingenuity, to pay homage to an art form gone almost into obsolescence and oblivion. The central theme of this film is war. In the depiction of battle scenes, Girish applied in detail the nuances of the martial art called Kalaripayattu. Although Kalaripayattu is, in essence, an artistic representation of the applied science of war, Girish’s careful cinematic presentation is not meant to trigger an extreme neurotic excitement in the average viewer, which he normally derives from the horrific battle scenes in commercial cinema. As a result, this experiment of Girish was apparently a failure. This hurt Girish like anything—a sentiment he expressed to his

friend Samik Banerjee in a letter. A quotation from that letter, dated 6th December 1978, would not be out of place here—“Let me say how deeply troubled I was by what you have said about Ondanandu Kaladalli in your letter. The general response to the film from the intellectuals in Karnataka has been to praise it as a technical achievement but otherwise as little more than a commercial ‘fighting film’. On the other hand the throngs that usually patronize ‘fighting films’ disappointed my producers by their wary reaction – they found the film too bitter and disturbing. So response such as yours does go in a long way in boosting up one’s morale. Many thanks.” But Girish did not abandon the path of experimentation. Using a story from Kannada mythology, he depicted the woeful degradation of environment and nature triggered by the greed of the people in the film ‘Cheluvi’. The ancient Indian society and classical literature were two favourite subjects of Girish. He adapted the fourth-century playwright Shudraka’s ‘Mricchhakaatika’, for his Hindi film ‘Utsav’ (1984). Here in the context of the ancient society’s prevalent moral edicts, he created a design of how the suppressed desires and lustfulness of men affect their relationship with women.

Girish has made documentary films on some of his favourite personalities and subjects. Among the three most notable of these works one (titled ‘D R Bendre’, 1972) is centred around the Jnanpith Award-winning modern Kannada poet Dattatreya Ramchandra Bendre (1896-1981), who is revered like Jivanananda

Dash (1899-1954) of Bengal, the second (titled 'Kanaka Purandar', 1988) one around Bhakhti poets Kanaka Dasa and Purandara Dasa from the fifteenth century, and the third one around the influence of Sufism and Bhakhti movement on the Indian soil, titled 'The Lamp in the Niché' (1990).



For his interest in experimentation, Girish dabbled in video technology and produced 'Woh Ghar' (telefilms, 1984) and 'Chidambar Rahasya' (television serial, 2006). He also acted in television serials titled 'Nukkad' (1986), 'Malgudi Days' (1987) and 'Indradhanush' (1989). He was the presenter in the popular science show 'Turning Point' (1991) on Doordarshan.

A man dedicated to the audio-visual media, he was like a mentor to many young persons, especially from the world of Kannada cinema, ready to help them out. Just as he helped veterans like T. S. Nagabharana¹⁹, or Nagesh Kukunoor²⁰ early in their career, his

benevolence has inspired newcomers like K. M. Chaitanya²¹ or Kavitha Lankesh²². Girish did not think twice before giving consent to act in Chaitanya's action-packed gangster film 'Aa Dinagalu' (2007), or the out and out commercial film 'Tananam Tananam' (2006) by Kavitha Lankesh. Chaitanya reminisced, "He was always ahead of his times, and that made him the darling of youngsters. He was always encouraging them, spotting talent and pushing them forward. A lot of people looked up to him for that."²³

In 1974, Shabana Azmi was cast opposite Girish in Basu Chatterjee's²⁴ 'Swami', and she was surprised seeing Girish essaying a character quite opposite to his personality—"confident, articulate, erudite, a true intellectual", wrote Shabana²⁵. He later starred opposite Hindi cinema's superstar Salman Khan, in 'Tiger Zinda Hai' (dir. Kabir Khan, 2017) moulding his performance to suit the demands of a big-budget film, evincing opulence and extravaganza. After the demise of Girish, Chaitanya reminisced, Girish never appeared in the set conscious about his own image. While acting, he would surrender himself to the director—literally becoming a puppet in his or her hands—he knew that his only job as a professional actor was to help the director unconditionally, not weigh him or her down with the burden of his own achievements or social reputation. While directing, he would remain open to suggestions from almost everybody in the set—"...he was democratic. Every cameraman could give him suggestions, the editors could cut off something that he

had shot, the actors could improvise in his presence and say, 'No, I'll do it this way'. He would work with them."²⁶ That is the hallmark of a true professional.²⁷

He had his own creative works to complement his image as a film and television professional. There he did not compromise with his personal beliefs in his own creative endeavours. To that extent his career path resembled those of Balraj Sahni²⁸ and Utpala Dutt²⁹. Both of them, despite being part of mainstream show business, were extremely erudite, articulate and politically conscious. And, like Karnad, both were writers and playwrights.

Film industry complexes are often referred to, and derided, as tinsel towns. But, all that glitters there is not tinsel always—real gems also glitter. So did Girish Karnad, in his own right.

1 . Sen (b. 1933) is an acclaimed economist, Nobel laureate (1998) and Bharat Ratna (1999, the highest civilian honour in India) awardee . He has made significant contributions to welfare economics, social justice theory, economic theories of food distribution and famines, development economics, etc. He articulated his idea of 'multiple identities' in his book 'Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny' (2006).

2 . Girish has to his credit 15 plays—'Maa Nishadha' (one act play, 1961), 'Yaya-

ti' (1961), 'Tughlaq' (1964), 'Hayavadana' (The Horse-headed man, 1971), 'Anjumalige' (1977), 'Hittina Hunja' (Bali: the sacrifice, 1980), 'Nagamandala' (Play with cobra, 1988), 'Taledanda' (Death by beheading, 1990), 'Agni mattu Male' (The Fire and the Rain, 1995), 'Tipu Sultan Kanda Kanasu' (The Dream of Tipu Sultan, 2006), 'Odakalu Bimba' (Broken Images, 2006), 'Maduve Album' (Wedding Album, 2006), 'Flowers' (2012), 'Benda Kaalu on Toast' (Boiled Beans on Toast, 2012), 'Rakshasa Tangadi' (Crossing to Talikota, 2018).

3. Girish held administrative positions as the Director of Film and Television Institute of India, Pune (1974-75), Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi (1988-93), and the Director of Nehru Centre, London (2000-03).

4. Bhima-Koregaon is a small village in the state of Maharashtra. On January 1, 1818, a Dalit-dominated force from the British Indian army had wrested control over the Maratha region by defeating a Maratha army, as part of the third and final Anglo-Maratha war. When the Dalits tried to celebrate the bi-centenary of that battle they were thwarted by the 'right wing' groups through large-scale violence. It led to nation-wide protests and widespread state retaliation.

5. Lankesh (1962-2017) was a journalist-turned-activist. She started her career as an English-language journalist. After the demise of her father, P Lankesh, she became the editor of the Kannada weekly started by her father. After a few years she began running

her own vernacular weekly, speaking against right-wing Hindu extremism, campaigning for women's rights and opposing caste-based discrimination, ruffling quite a few feathers. She was shot dead by assailants outside her home on September 5, 2017.

6 . Pansare (1933-2015) was a left wing politician associated with the Communist Party of India. But he was an academic, having to his credit more than 20 volumes of work, most of these being commentaries on social issues. He was particularly averse to the ideology of Hindutva. He and his wife were attacked by armed assailants on February 16, 2015. Govind succumbed to his injury on February 20.

7. Dabholkar (1945-2013) (1945-2013) was a medical practitioner, social activist, rationalist and author. He was particularly active in eradication of superstition. He was murdered on August 20, 2013.

8. Kalburgi (1938-2015) was a scholar of Kannada Vachana literature of 11th and 12th centuries and a noted epigraphist. He also raised his voice against superstition in Hinduism. He was shot dead by unidentified assailants at his residence on August 30, 2015.

9. Ray (1921-1992) is arguably the most accomplished filmmaker India has produced, by virtue of his mastery over script-writing, direction, lyric composition and music composition. He directed 36 films, including features, documentaries and shorts, and won several national and international awards. He was also an acclaimed calligrapher, graphic

artist and author. In 1992, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, California, USA, conferred on Ray, an Honorary Oscar for Life-time Achievement in cinema. The Government of France conferred on him the Légion d'honneur, the highest French decoration, in 1987, and the Government of India conferred on him the Bharat Ratna, in 1992.

10 . Max von Sydow (1929-2020) was a Sweden-born international actor, having a seven decade career in European and American cinema, television and theatre. He appeared in more than 150 films and several television series in multiple languages. The roles he essayed ranged from impassive, contemplative protagonists to cynical, contemptuous artists and menacing, often gleeful villains. He was a favourite of Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007) and performed in 11 of his films, including 'The Seventh Seal' (1956), 'Wild Strawberries' (1957), 'The Virgin Spring' (1960), 'Through a Glass Darkly' (1961), 'Winter Light' (1963) and 'The Touch' (1971).

11. Bhaduri (1889-1959) was one of the vanguards of modern Bengali theatre, performing multiple roles as an actor, director, playwright and scenographer. He tried to introduce realism and naturalism to Bengali stagecraft. He was also an actor and director in Bengali cinema.

12. Karanth (1929-2002) was associated with both theatre and cinema—in Kannada and Hindi.

13. Paranjpye (b. 1938) is a film direc-

tor and screenwriter. Her oeuvre includes such award-winning Hindi films as ‘Sparsh’ (‘Touch’, 1980), ‘Chashme Buddoor’ (‘The Evil Gaze’, 1981), ‘Katha’ (‘Story’, 1983), and ‘Disha’ (‘Direction’, 1990). She is also a playwright and theatre director.

14. Shabana Azmi (b. 1950) is an alumnus of Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, and accomplished actress of film, television and theatre.

15. Like Shabana, Naseeruddin Shah (b. 1960) is an alumnus of Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, and accomplished actress of film, television and theatre.

16. Benegal (b. 1934) is an internationally acclaimed director and screenwriter. He has made 24 feature films (mostly in Hindi) since 1974, 41 documentaries since 1967, 4 short films between 1962 and 1975, and 5 television serials between 1986 and 2014.

17. www.hindustantimes.com, dated June 15, 2019, quoting Shabana Azmi’s Facebook post “Farewell my friend: Shabana Azmi pays tribute to Girish Karnad”. Retrieved on September 12, 2019.

18. Ibid.

19. Nagabharana (b. 1953) is a Kannada film director, who has worked successfully in both mainstream and parallel films. He has also achieved success in television. Karnad worked with him for films like ‘Anweshane’ (1983), ‘Shanta Shishunala Sharifa’ (1990), ‘Mysore Mallige’ (1991), and ‘Janmadata’ (1999).

20. Kukunoor (b. 1967) is a film director, screenwriter and actor, who is known for his works in parallel cinema. Karnad worked with him for films like ‘Iqbal’ (2005), ‘Dor’ (2006), and ‘8x10 Tasveer’ (2009).

21. Chaitanya (b. 1974) considers himself a disciple of Karnad, having been groomed by the latter for both film and television works.

22. Kavitha (b. 1974) is the younger sister of the slain journalist Gauri Lankesh and an admirer of Karnad’s accomplishments.

23. www.firstpost.com, dated June 16, 2019. “Girish Karnad and his Democratic Art: K M Chaitanya recounts making a film on the playwright” by Phalguni Rao. Retrieved on September 15, 2019.

24. Basu (b. 1930) switched over from a career as a cartoonist to screenwriting and filmmaking. Since the 1970s he became associated with middle cinema in Hindi language.

25. www.hindustantimes.com, dated June 15, 2019, quoting Shabana Azmi’s Facebook post “Farewell my friend: Shabana Azmi pays tribute to Girish Karnad”. Retrieved on September 12, 2019.

26. www.firstpost.com, dated June 16, 2019. “Girish Karnad and his Democratic Art: K M Chaitanya recounts making a film on the playwright” by Phalguni Rao. Retrieved on September 15, 2019.

27. Commissioned by the Information Department of Karnataka, K M Chaitanya made a documentary, in 2009, on his guide and

mentor Girish Karnad, titled 'Nadedhu Banda Daari' (which literally translates to "Walk up the rocky path"). www.firstpost.com, dated June 16, 2019. "Girish Karnad and his Democratic Art: K M Chaitanya recounts making a film on the playwright" by Phalguni Rao. Retrieved on September 15, 2019. Later Chaitanya produced a 26-minute documentary on Girish, in English, titled 'Scattering Golden Feathers' for Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, in 2014. www.thehindu.com, dated June 12, 2019. "Two documentaries on the playwright".

28 . Balraj Sahni (1913-1973) was born Yudhishtir Sahni. He completed his Master's degree in English Literature from Government College University, Lahore. After short stints in teaching and radio journalism, he committed himself to full-time acting in Bombay's film industry, while keeping in touch with the Communist Party of India till his death. He is remembered for his roles in 'Dharti ke Lal' (Dir. K A Abbas, 1946), 'Do Bigha Zameen' (Dir. Bimal Roy, 1953), 'Chhoti Bahen' (Dir. Prasad, 1959), 'Kabuliwala' (Dir. Hemen Gupta, 1961), 'Haqeeqat' (Dir. Chetan Anad, 1964), 'Ek Phool Do Mali' (Dir. Devendra Goel, 1969) and 'Garm Hawa' (Dir. M S Sathyu, 1973).

29. Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) was a distinguished actor, director and writer-playwright. He was regarded as a pioneering figure in modern Indian theatre. His major plays, including 'Ferari Fouz' ('The Absconding Army', 1961), 'Kallol' ('The Waves', 1965), 'Tiner Talowar' ('The Tinsel Sword', 1971), 'Barricade' (1972), 'Duhswapner Nagari' ('The Nightmare City', 1974), were vehicles of his Marxist ideology. In a film career spanning 40 years he acted in over 100 films, not all very distinguished ones. But he is remembered for his roles in 'Bhuvan Shome' (Dir. Mrinal Sen, 1969), 'The Guru' (Dir. James Ivory, 1969), 'Guddi' ('The Girl', Dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1971), 'Palanka' ('The Ornamental Bedstead' Dir. Rajen Tarafdar, 1975), 'Gol Maal' ('The Chaos', Dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1979), 'Joy Baba Felunath' ('The Elephant God', Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1979), 'Hirak Rajar Deshe' ('Kingdom of Diamonds', Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1980), 'Agantuk' ('The Stranger', Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1991), and 'Padma Nadir Majhee' ('The Boatman of Padma', Dir. Goutam Ghose, 1993).

Note: The author is grateful to Samik Bandyopadhyay for granting him access to the letters of Ray and Karnad, as also the permission to use these.

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