

# Exploring Bhoota Kola and the Themes of Tribal Jurisprudence, Retribution and Justice Through Divine Intervention in Kantara

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## Abstract

In 2022, Rishab Shetty's directed Kantara's Part I got released which proved to be more than a cinematic show for profoundly displaying the themes of indigenous spirituality, sacred tribal ecology, highlighting the tradition of Bhoota Kola as theatre of law and retribution and justice through divine intervention. This year (2025), Part II of the same movie got released and received worldwide acknowledgement for making an interesting attempt to bridge tribal customary practices with juridical perspective in tribal ecology portraying the folk tradition of Bhoota Kola<sup>1</sup> which is largely practiced in coastal Karnataka. It is a form of spirit worship practiced among the Tulu-speaking communities with themes of land rights, divine justice and tribal jurisprudence. This paper aims to explore how Kantara represents the amalgamation of state law and tribal moral order, situating retribution, folk tradition and tribal jurisprudence. It examines stress points between modern state law and justice manifestations not through legal code but through cosmological reciprocity and divine custodianship, highlighting India's plural legal landscape and engaging constitutional instruments like the Fifth Schedule, PESA Act (1996) and Forest Rights Act (2006) in this direction.

**Keywords:** Tribal Jurisprudence, Retribution, Natural Justice, Sacred Ecology, Bhoota Kola, Cosmology

## INTRODUCTION

The word Kantara means 'forest' or 'a large area covered with trees' which very much provides the kickstart for discussing all the themes mentioned above.

As we know, people have been living in different corners of the world, in various terrains and climates. The movie portrays a tribal community living in coastal Karnataka, including the areas of Udupi and Kasargod where the symbiotic relationship between the tribe and the forest can be seen. Such communities have historically depended on forests for their livelihood, drawing sustenance and cultural meaning from

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<sup>1</sup> A form of spirit worship with performance elements, Bhuta Kola is practised in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi, Karnataka and Kasargod, Kerala – a cultural area generally referred to as Tulu Nadu. The primary ritual of Bhuta Kola consists of possession by *bhuta* (spirits) or *daivas* (deities). In Tulu Nadu, bhutas are believed to offer protection and blessings or cause harm, misfortune, or crop failure. "Kola" refers to a play or performance in Tulu, and the term thus signifies a ceremony for bhutas.

<https://mapacademy.io/article/bhuta-kola/>

the natural world around them. The economy and livelihood of these communities are intertwined with their forest surroundings. This deep connection is often discussed by scholars like M.N. Srinivas, D.N. Majumdar, L.P. Vidyarthi<sup>2</sup> and Haimendorf.<sup>3</sup> Tribes' worship and protect their forests because for them forests' produce is the only means of survival. For them, forest is the centre of all their actions and ideas. Also, it creates a barrier in communication between the tribes and the masses living outside forests. They often find themselves isolated and not relating to the demands and needs of the people living in cities or villages. This leads to their unique patterns of living and methods of expression.

In the increasingly globalised world, Kantara reclaims indigenous legal consciousness where there are no codified laws but it is seen, sung, performed and realised through a folk tradition called Bhoota Kola, a performative ritual where a chosen person (medium) channels a Daiva (spirit deity) dispensing divine justice and restoring social equilibrium preventing crime and malicious intentions. In this context, Sally Falk Moore's notion of the 'semi-autonomous social field,' the tribal community in Kantara constitutes a distinct legal world, producing and enforcing norms through ritual consensus rather than state coercion. The film's central theme is the conflict between the community's ancestral custodianship of land and the bureaucratic encroachment of the forest department for the personal profit of king. It exposes the dissonance and tensions between customary jurisprudence and the state's bureaucratic sovereignty and machinery.

Through the prism of Bhoota Kola, this article explores three interrelated ideas: (1) Tribal Jurisprudence as a moral and spiritual order (2) Retribution as a cosmological restoration rather than punitive act and (3) Divine Justice as an ecological ethic embedded in indigenous law. These altogether illuminate how Kantara stages the confrontation between cosmic law (ṛta) and codified law of the modern state where divine justice asserts itself against the machinery of the state.

Dr. Seuss aptly writes "I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues."<sup>4</sup> This can be understood as the spirit and vision such communities hold because forests are their home and any harm to them will ignite tensions and sorrow. G.M. Hopkins also mentions in this context "And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil"<sup>5</sup> reflecting Industrial expansion and pollution and ecological exploitation contrasting with the enduring vitality of divine creation. The movie Kantara brings to light how all such works, though separated by centuries and cultures, share a profound eco-spiritual consciousness that critiques human alienation from the sacred natural world.

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<sup>2</sup> L. P. Vidyarthi and B. K. Roy Burman, *The Tribal Culture of India* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1976).

Authors provide a comparative and comprehensive account of Indian tribal societies, analysing and evaluating their social, economic, political and religious systems alongside aspects of folklore, art and kinship. The work remains foundational for understanding the dynamics of matriliney, polyandry and tribal village structure.

<https://rgu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BATS102.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> C.V. Haimendorf, Anthropologist, appointed by the government for preparing ethnographic account of the Apatanis. Later, he kept visiting the Apatanis and published *The Hidden Land* (1953), *The Apatanis and their Neighbours* (A primitive civilization of the Eastern Himalayas) (1962) and *A Himalayan Tribe from Cattle to Cash* (1980).

<https://rgu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BATS102.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Seuss [Theodor Seuss Geisel], *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," written 1877, in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1918), 5.

### **Bhoota Kola- Ritual Performance & Juridical Perspective**

A ritual called nema or kola is performed for ghosts/gods. Conducting kola/nema has its own race and rules. The face of the medium or divine dancer is painted, wrapped in a Siri made of coconut feathers and danced awakening or invoking the deity. The Divine Dancer gives justice to human beings and resolves disputes through the Word of God.<sup>6</sup>

Bhoota Kola is performed by a trained person who is believed to have temporarily become a God himself. The performer shows an aggressive and bellicose outlook, dancing fiercely and performing multiple rituals. This performer appears like the court of law, is feared and respected in the community and is believed to give answers to people's problems on behalf of the God. Intense drum sounds and music accompany the dancing and worship rituals. By praying together during Bhoota Kola, the community seeks God's blessing, prosperity and pray for the riddance of several problems faced by the community. The Bhoota's orders become moral order and sanctions and are binding. They are followed willingly and are not based on coercion or brute force. As Kamat observes, the Bhoota is "a moral legislator in the vernacular idiom," delivering verdicts that command communal obedience.<sup>7</sup>

Rishabh Shetty, the director, writer and actor of the movie, himself used to be a part of such performances which very much inspired him to explore this tradition thoroughly in life and throughout the movie. This ritual is a living example or testament to the continuity of precolonial legal traditions that saw justice as inseparable from spirituality and faith. Among the Tuluva and other similar communities of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi, spirits act as conservators or custodians of the land, mediating between physical and the metaphysical world. This ritual is characterized by dance, trance and possession. It is both an act of worship and adjudication of justice simultaneously. The movie provides an insight to premodern legal notions where Daiva is both the witness as well as guarantor or protector of justice and forest land. The land is not seen just as a property but a sacred trust and covenant exhibiting a structure of legitimacy reminiscent of what Jacques Derrida calls *le force de loi*, the "mystical foundation of authority."<sup>8</sup> Upendra Baxi also aptly writes in this context, "indigenous systems often operate through a 'moral-juridical continuum' blurring distinctions between law, religion and ethics."<sup>9</sup> Justice in this case is not a bureaucratic act but a revelation, the Daiva's speech is at once divine and juridical.

### **Tribal Jurisprudence and Justice:**

Jurisprudence is the study that deals with the fundamental principles and various concepts of law. It guides a person to understand the deeper meaning of law. It deals with concepts that regulate human behaviour in accordance with the conduct, values, needs and goals of every societal dimension which keeps changing

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<sup>6</sup> <https://karnatakaturism.org/destinations/bhoota-aradhane/>

<sup>7</sup> During the ritual performance of *Bhoota Kola*, a trained oracle becomes possessed by a *Bhoota* (ghost spirit) or *Daiva* (divine spirit) and acts as a divine judge for the community. This process is described in Kamat's book, *Modernity and Spirit Worship in India* (2019).

Ishii, M. (2019). *Modernity and spirit worship in India: An anthropology of the Umwelt*. Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–67.

<sup>9</sup> Upendra Baxi, "From Human Rights to the Right to be Human: Some Heresies," *India International Centre Quarterly* 13, no. 3/4 (December 1986): 185–200.

from time to time.<sup>10</sup>

Tribal jurisprudence refers to the legal principles, customs and judicial systems of tribal and indigenous people which can involve a complex interplay between customary law and state law. It is a field of study focused on developing a unique, culturally-specific legal framework that reflects a tribe's own traditions, values and sovereignty.

A noticeable dimension of Bhoota Kola jurisprudence is the recognition of land and forest as sentient entities. The forest lands are not mere collection of trees, fruits and other produce but they have the ability to feel. In the film also, it is stressed again and again that the forest is not just a backdrop but a litigant; its sanctity is defended and preserved by the Daiva which are often violated by state intrusion. This tribal and ecological jurisprudence resonates with the Forest Rights Act (2006).<sup>11</sup> The law, though statutory, echoes the indigenous understanding that human rights to land derive from custodianship, not ownership.

The PESA Act (1996)<sup>12</sup> and Forest Rights Act are significant efforts to democratize governance and recognise indigenous self-determination. The PESA Act affirms the competence of Gram Sabhas to regulate local resources, while the FRA recognizes community forest rights.

Moreover, a large number of people have lived in and around forests for a long period in a symbiotic relationship. This relationship has led to formalized or informal customary rules of use often governed by ethical beliefs and practices that have ensured forest as sentient and sacred entities. By portraying the land as a divine endowment rather than a commodity or area, Kantara invokes a sacred ecology that stands against bureaucratic incursions. Here, the ritual becomes a reminder of pre-state tribal jurisprudence (similar to Locke's State of Nature) that pronounces legal legitimacy in moral reciprocity with nature.

In Kantara, the logic of terra nullius (the idea that indigenous landscapes are unowned and available for regulation) is evident. The villagers' spiritual claim to the forest, rooted in the Daiva's covenant, is seen as the only way of dispensing and securing justice to both the forest and forest people. The villagers' resistance, culminating in Shiva's spiritual transformation becomes an assertion of juridical sovereignty beyond the state's comprehension.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.lexisnexis.in/blogs/introduction-to-jurisprudence/>

<sup>11</sup> The Forest Rights Act, India or the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act is also known by other names like the Tribal Rights Act or the Tribal Land Act.

It deals with the rights of the communities that dwell in the forests (including Scheduled Tribes), over land and other resources, which have been denied to them over the years because of the continuation of forest laws from the colonial era in the country. The act was passed in December 2006. It deals with the rights of forest-dwelling communities over land and other resources. The Act grants legal recognition to the rights of traditional forest-dwelling communities, partially correcting the injustice caused by the forest laws.

<https://lotusarise.com/forest-rights-act-2006-upsc/>

<sup>12</sup> The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, commonly known as the PESA Act or Extension Act, is a landmark legislation aimed at enabling local self-governance in scheduled tribal areas. By enabling the tribal communities to exercise greater control over their local governance, it serves the twin objectives of strengthening the local self-governance in India as well as empowering the tribal communities.

<https://www.nextias.com/blog/pesa-act-1996/>

### Retribution and Cosmic Restoration

In Kantara, the scene in which Shiva transforms into the Daiva, captures a really profound notion of retributive justice that is very different from the state's punitive paradigm. Within tribal cosmology, retribution is restorative rather than repressive. It seeks to re-balance moral and ecological order rather than inflict proportional punishment. This view aligns with what Santos (2007) terms the "ecology of justices,"<sup>13</sup> wherein indigenous systems perceive wrongdoing as a rupture and disbalance in the triadic harmony of human-spirit-nature relations.

The retribution that unfolds through the Bhoota Kola ritual is, therefore, not vengeance but restitution. When the corrupt forest officers and local elites exploit the land, the Daiva intervenes to protect and restore tribal and natural equilibrium. The punishment is divinely designed and cosmologically justified. The villagers' belief in the Daiva's impartiality and neutrality guarantees the legitimacy of this justice which operates independently of the state's judicial machinery.

The Daiva's intervention highlights what Derrida calls 'justice beyond law' (exposing the loopholes of legal formalism). The Daiva's justice, mostly violent in form, serves the purpose of *ṛta*. The violence of the sacred is thus regenerative and not destructive. It renews the social contract between deity, land and community. Justice, here, is not adjudicated through evidence or precedent but through revelation by Daiva rooted in cosmological restoration of tribal moral order. This marks departure from dependence on bureaucratic legality of the forest department whose authority is derived from codified statutes but lacks the moral legitimacy which the community attributes to the practice of Bhoota Kola.

Retribution in tribal jurisprudence is indivisible from reciprocity. The wrongdoer's punishment is an act of purification and reconciliation ensuring the restoration of triadic balance. As Baxi notes, "indigenous law punishes not to isolate but to reintegrate," reaffirming social and spiritual cohesion.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the film becomes an allegory for legal disenchantment and confronts the enduring charisma of indigenous law which reclaims justice as a moral and metaphysical act.

Also, the phrase by M.K. Gandhi "there is enough for everybody's need and not for anybody's greed"<sup>15</sup> becomes very relevant in this context. It means that the Earth has sufficient natural resources to satisfy everyone's basic necessities, but not enough to support endless greed and excessive consumption. It argues in favour of sustainable development and warns against the over-exploitation of resources driven by human greed. This, in turn, justifies the means of retribution and cosmic restoration used by such communities to conserve and protect their homeland and our nature.

### Sacred Ecology and Politics of Resistance

The ecological landscape of Kantara- dense forests, sacred groves and agrarian borders functions as a juridical territory in itself. The forest is both subject and witness to the community's moral order. The intrusion of the state represented by the forest department and police, manifests the colonial continuity of legal power over indigenous territories. The indigenous communities consider the ecology as sacred and sentient. They profess and practice sustainable development and do not use forest selfishly to meet their ends. For them, forests are their home and source of sustenance and not the means to earn enormous profit.

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<sup>13</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 30, no. 1 (2007): 45–89.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> <https://brainly.in/question/3817387>

Despite constitutional provisions such as the Fifth Schedule, FRA and PESA Act, tribal self-governance remains subordinate to bureaucratic setup. The Forest Rights Act, while recognizing community rights, continues to operate within a paradigm that treats indigenous stewardship as an exception rather than the norm.

The film's ecological justice is thus a critique of the political economy of environmentalism that privileges and prioritises bureaucratic rationality over much required custodianship. When the Daiva reclaims the forest through divine intervention, it symbolizes the re-inscription of moral ecology over the commodified logic of modern environmental law. The Bhoota Kola performance is a legal hearing, spiritual rite and political protest, all at once.

By merging the sacred and the juridical, Kantara is an attempt to re-imagine the aesthetic space of cinema, transforming it into an act of cultural resistance. The film challenges the secular orthodoxy of legal modernity and draws parallels between state justice and divine justice asserting that justice cannot be disentangled from spirituality and ecology. The scene in the movie where the deity walks alongside the modern heir of the royal family offers a reconciliatory vision; a sense of juridical pluralism that recognizes both divine and constitutional sovereignty.

In the Derridean sense, the Daiva represents the "force of law" in its purest form, "law as mystical, moral and immanent."<sup>16</sup> The Daiva's law is deeply situated: it arises from soil, song, and spirit. Kantara, therefore, is not merely a film on faith, it is a cinematic jurisprudence that restores to Indian legal imagination the possibility of justice as sacred relation.

"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; Little we see in Nature that is ours."<sup>17</sup> These famous lines by Wordsworth clearly laments the materialism and industrial capturing of forest lands in order to selfishly and blindly fulfil the ambitions of businessmen. State machinery is often seen to support such demands. It is an early critique of environmental exploitation during the Industrial Revolution which seems to be more relevant in the contemporary world.

### Similar Practices

Similar ritualistic-judicial practices are visible in many parts of the world disclosing that Bhoota Kola is not an isolated instance or custom but part of a global pattern of indigenous justice. Among the Yoruba of West Africa, for example, the Egungun masquerade functions as a moral tribunal through which ancestral spirits intervene in communal disputes, maintain ethical-moral order and assure justice.

In Melanesia, the Tambaran cult executes cosmic retribution and reconciliation rituals grounded in kinship-based law.

Additionally, the Native American communities, such as the Navajo (Diné), continue to practice peace-making courts that draw from spiritual cosmology to restore harmony (Hózhó) rather than impose punishment.

In Andean cosmologies of South America, the ayllu system combines environmental stewardship with collective pronouncement emphasizing reciprocity (ayni) and maintaining equilibrium between humans

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority."* *Cardozo Law Review*, 11(5–6), 1990, 919–1045.

<sup>17</sup> William Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much with Us," in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 1:52.

and nature. These examples<sup>18</sup> indicate that the juridical function of ritual-mediating between human law, natural law and divine intervention constitutes a recurring mode of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos terms an “ecology of justices.”<sup>19</sup>

### Relevance and Evaluation

Ritual-legal practices and customs such as Bhoota Kola in India, Egungun masquerades among the Yoruba or peace-making ceremonies of the Navajo represent systems of moral regulation, local jurisprudence for conflict resolution and social justice which is beyond modern codified state laws and policies. Their persistence till date highlights the coexistence of multiple normative orders within a single socio-political field.

In many indigenous settings, ritual and law are inseparable. Justice is not a detached institutional process but a cosmic performance reaffirming the triadic harmony between humans, ancestors and nature. The Bhoota Kola, for instance, stages a dialogue between divine and human authority, where the spirit acts as a custodian of ethical equilibrium, symbolically sanctioning violations against community or environment. Such performances extend the domain of jurisprudence beyond human codification, envisioning Derrida’s notion of “the mystical foundation of authority” where law derives legitimacy from that which exceeds rational structure.

The relevance of such practices in contemporary times lie in their epistemological challenge to state-centric and positivist models of justice. As Santos argues modern law often marginalizes subaltern epistemologies creating an abyssal line that excludes indigenous and customary systems from recognition. Ritual-based justice systems, however, reveal the “ecology of justice” that Santos mentions. The Bhoota Kola demonstrates that law need not to be always written or codified or judicial forums but can be reflected and attained through performative spaces of community ritual. Justice, in this context, is an ongoing negotiation between the sacred and the social, not a terminal verdict.

From a legal-anthropological perspective, these practices function as social technologies for maintaining equilibrium in small-scale societies. Moore’s “semi-autonomous social field” envisions how indigenous communities generate and enforce norms and customs independent of state institutions. The Daiva’s adjudication in Bhoota Kola or the ancestor’s intervention in Egungun masquerades effectively restores social order through moral persuasion rather than coercive force. In many ways, these systems achieve what modern law often struggles to “consensual legitimacy.”

The community perceives the ritual verdict not as divine confirmation of moral truth. This encourages compliance rooted in shared belief rather than fear of punishment, syncing with Amartya Sen’s argument that justice must be ‘realized in practice’ and not merely codified.

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<sup>18</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962); Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986); John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003); and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense: Law, Globalization, and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). These works collectively show that indigenous justice systems—whether among African, Oceanic, or Native American peoples—embed moral reasoning and social order within ritual cosmologies that blur the line between the sacred and the juridical.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Evaluating such practices in the present, however, requires a nuanced balance between cultural respect and critical scrutiny. While indigenous jurisprudence embodies profound ecological and ethical wisdom, it is not immune to internal hierarchies or gendered exclusions. For instance, participation in Bhoota Kola or similar rituals is often mediated through hereditary lineages and women's roles may remain symbolically significant yet socially constrained. Anthropologists like Vidyarthi and Roy Burman emphasize that tribal systems are dynamic, continually negotiating between tradition and transformation. The challenge lies in recognizing their moral authority without romanticizing them as timeless or unchanging.

In the context of postcolonial India, integrating such practices into the legal consciousness complements the constitutional vision of pluralism embodied in the Fifth Schedule, PESA and the Forest Rights Act. These frameworks implicitly acknowledge that indigenous justice and environmental custodianship form a continuous moral economy. Kantara dramatizes this principle by portraying the daiva's final retribution as a form of natural justice with divine intervention, a restoration of order when human law fails or state intrusion cannot be prevented in any other way. The film, thus, resonates the insight that justice in indigenous systems is relational and restorative rather than adversarial.

Globally, similar movements toward recognising indigenous legal orders are visible in Canada's First Nations jurisprudence, New Zealand's Maori tikanga and the Mapuche legal claims in Chile. In each case, the state is confronted with the task of decolonizing law and acknowledging that indigenous cosmologies constitute legitimate sources of normativity. These developments invite rethinking of justice not merely as a legal product but as an ethical ecology, a synthesis of human, spiritual and environmental relations. As Upendra Baxi remarks such encounters demand a jurisprudence of "listening" to subaltern voices and their vernacular grammars of justice.

At a deeper philosophical level, ritual-legal practices foreground the inseparability of law and life. They enact what Lefort calls the "symbolic institution of society" wherein the sacred provides the imaginary foundation of the political. The Bhoota Kola, like the Egungun or Navajo peace-making makes visible the invisible sources of belief that justice emanates from a moral order which is older, greater and larger than the state. Derrida's paradox of law- that it must be both founded on violence and justified by justice, finds resolution in these traditions where the violence of retribution is always framed as restoration and never domination.

In evaluating the contemporary relevance of such practices and traditions one must see them not as archaic remnants but as living archives of moral jurisprudence. They persist because they articulate a truth that modern systems often neglect. In this frame, justice is not a function of power but of balance and not of procedure but of relationship. In an era of ecological crisis and juridical alienation, the Bhoota Kola and its global analogues remind us that justice is ultimately an act of reconciliation and at times it is more effective than the solutions or laws prescribed by the state machinery.

## Conclusion

Kantara stresses the importance of all aspects of life whether tribals or the lord's people and the need to protect nature is one of the prominent topics of discussion in the present scenario. Development should not create imbalance in nature and if there is a destruction of values, nature has the power to restore the

balance.<sup>20</sup>The ritual universe of Bhoota Kola in Kantara ultimately gestures toward an alternative jurisprudence of sustainability—one that transcends the anthropocentric logic of modern law and reorients justice toward coexistence with the more-than-human world. Within the cosmology of the Tuluva communities, forests are not inert resources but sentient and sacred entities, inhabited by divine forces that govern moral and ecological balance. The Daiva is not merely a deity to be propitiated but the juridical manifestation of the forest’s will, embodying the idea that ecological well-being and social harmony are mutually dependent. In recognizing the forest as a living subject of law, Bhoota Kola rearticulates what modern environmental jurisprudence now seeks to institutionalize through doctrines such as rights of nature and eco-centric justice.

This indigenous model of sustainability places conservation not within technocratic regimes of regulation but within ethical relationships and ritual obligations. The community protects the forest as kin, as ancestral presence. The annual performance of Bhoota Kola renews this covenant, transforming environmental stewardship into an act of devotion and jurisprudence simultaneously. Such an understanding resonates with global indigenous movements from the Māori concept of kaitiakitanga in New Zealand to the Quechua philosophy of Sumak Kawsay in the Andes, each affirming that the health of the earth is inseparable from the moral health of the community.

In the Indian view, this worldview aligns profoundly with the spirit of the Fifth Schedule, PESA and the FRA which collectively attempt to decentralize authority and recognize customary law as a legitimate form of governance. The rituals of Bhoota Kola embody precisely the moral and ecological vision, one where tribal customary systems act as non-secular, parallel legal orders, complementing rather than contradicting state law. Far from being archaic, these ritual-legal systems provide dynamic and adaptive frameworks for community-led resource management, conflict resolution and ecological justice. They remind policymakers that conservation must be rooted in cultural continuity and spiritual reciprocity, not imposed through bureaucratic alienation.

Moreover, Bhoota Kola exemplifies how customary jurisprudence can coexist productively with modern governance without collapsing into superstition or resistance. It offers a living example of what Upendra Baxi calls “vernacular cosmopolitanism,” a dialogical space where the local and the universal negotiate their ethical terms. This hybrid model invites the state to view indigenous practices not as obstacles to modernization but as repositories of normative innovation. Within this context, sustainability becomes not only an environmental goal but also a constitutional value.

Ultimately, the vision of Bhoota Kola expands the imagination of law itself. By restoring dignity to customary laws, recognizing forests as sacred interlocutors and embedding moral responsibility in ecological coexistence, it gestures toward a post-secular jurisprudence; the one where the sacred and the juridical, the natural and the normative, converge in a shared pursuit of balance. As the closing scenes of Kantara suggest, true justice is realized not when man asserts dominion over nature but when he/she remains in harmony with the sacred circle of reciprocity. In this sense, Bhoota Kola is not only a ritual of faith but a profound pedagogy of sustainable development, divine justice and sensitisation towards tribal values, notions, practices and jurisprudence.

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<sup>20</sup> K.V. Suja, “Wilderness and Tribal Culture: Environmental Consciousness in the movie *Kantara*,” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* 12, no. 1 (January 2024): g811–g814.