

# **Kannada Popular Press: An Appraisal of Tabloid Culture**

**RAMESH AROLI**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Indian language press in the post-Emergency period underwent a quick politicization and witnessed a shift (though not a 'print revolution') which was also part of the ongoing socio-cultural democratisation of the nation. And the scene in Karnataka was not different. The Eighties had to witness a political conflict and instability that was mirrored in media too. Various rational and literary groups that emerged in the decade engaged themselves with different formats of print journalism addressing this transition; which were popular in nature but political in terms of content. This paper intends to explore the factors that boosted the tabloid publications in Kannada and their effort to democratise the news coverage which is fundamental to the process of democratic print practices. Tabloid press, due to popular appeal has been considered as a 'low', 'yellow' or 'unproductive' journalism. Though Kannada has a flourishing tabloid press which is rhetoric and speaks to either semi-literates or 'ordinary people', it is rarely considered as a subject of academic study. With all criticism, subject needs to be studied considering the socio-political factors of the time and its cultural implications rather than looking at the institutional chronologies provided by the state. Most importantly, as it is suggested by scholars (John Fiske, Gripsrud Becker, Jönsson and Örnebring, Griffin-Foley), that in the current moment "scholarly debates about the production, values and ethics*

Ramesh Aroli

*and consumption of tabloidized media can most fruitfully take place in an interdisciplinary arena; an arena in which we can bring together past and present critical thinking in journalism, media and cultural studies around the articulation of the popular in the contemporary media landscape”.*

Key words: **Popular press, tabloid culture and Kannada magazines**

**Author: Ramesh Aroli**, Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India Email: [aroliramesh@gmail.com](mailto:aroliramesh@gmail.com)

## **INTRODUCTION**

By the end of Eighteenth century the practice of popular press/gutter press in the form of tabloid publications started in Britain and US. In the beginning of the Nineteenth century, experiments in the articulation of a popular voice in print were being pursued to draw the attention of the newspaper owners. Tabloid newspapers, especially in UK, boasted a very high degree of variation in terms of target market, political alignment, editorial style and circulation are concerned. Thus, various terms have been coined to describe the tabloid paper format. Broadly there are two main types of tabloid newspaper **Red top** and **Compact**. The modern popular tabloid newspapers in British have “more complex and socially inflected affair that demonstrates the national specificity of cultural developments”.(1)

In India, the historical analysis of media seems to be limited to orthodox historical narrative which is dominated by a method of ‘focusing on institutional chronologies, their relations with the state and with elites’. So, there is less scope to understand the media’s role in ‘constitution of publics’ for the formulation of new meanings of community, different social groups, nation and identity. For instance, initially the printing of

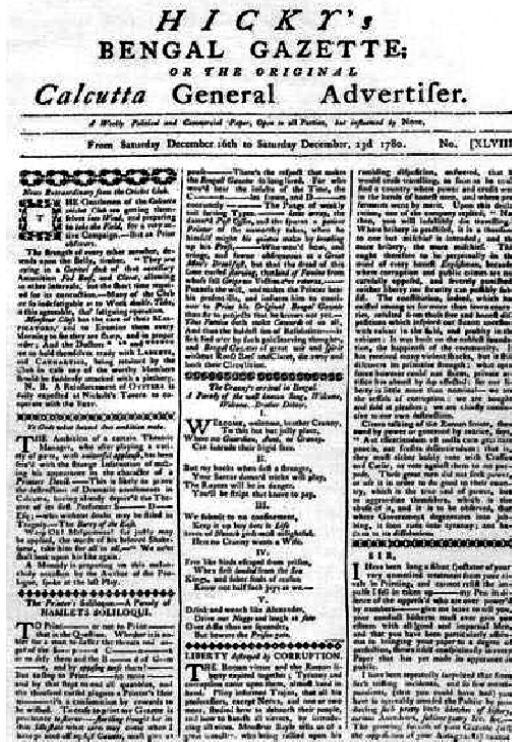


Fig.1 Front page of Hicky's Bengal Gazette (Calcutta General Advertiser) dated Saturday December 16<sup>th</sup> to Saturday Decemehr 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1780.

Source: Google Images

newspapers in India had very limited intensions though ownership remained with *public* (of government) and *private* (of non-governmental) and a strong adversarial press had an enormous impact on Indian politics.

In James Augustus Hicky's *The Bengal Gazette*, a four-page weekly tabloid, there were elements of popular journalism even if those were not politically motivated but clearly indicates the reporting of sensational/ gossip reporting. But as a journalistic practice 'popular press' emerged with the growth of Indian film industry, new literary practices and various social movements. The film and political magazines which came during the Sixties targeted a newly-educated middle class reader and were

Ramesh Aroli

used to promote the star persona by focusing on the politicians and their lifestyles. Almost in all major Indian languages the growth and popularity of these magazines continued over the decades, with a good number of literary figures contributing their works to these periodicals. After independence, the publishing houses from semi-urban spaces started special and general interest magazines to address the new educated 'prints consumer' class which was ready to buy a commodity that would publish something related to their stars and leaders.

Though there is no long history of *tabloid press* in India and is still an evolving concept, there were considerable number of *popular* magazines in English and most of regional languages which used to play the role of tabloids in terms of content, tone and editorial style. By proclaiming *Our Blitz, India's Blitz against Hitler!* a tabloid called **Blitz** was started by Russy Karanjia on February 1, 1941. It was in English and then branched out with Hindi, Marathi and Urdu versions. It was popular for spunky loud and screaming captions and telling photographs.

The paper's quality was coarse and the pictures grainy, but there was visual drama on *Blitz's* pages. *Blitz* appeared in an effort to break open the elite public life with a radical ideology and spunky writing. Accepting the notion of public life as the key arena of politics, the tabloid mined it for its radical potential, believing that hard-hitting, two-fisted reports could make a political difference. As a tabloid, then, *Blitz* dispensed with the convention of dispassionate observation and balanced opinion, and adopted a charged tone from the very beginning. It took on the role of a social investigator that dug beneath the surface of everyday life to ferret out the hidden truth that it announced loudly on its pages.

In Karnataka the socio-political and cultural changes that occurred during the pre-Emergency period as it happened in other parts



Fig. 2. Cover pages of Blitz, October 17, 1959

Source: Google Images

of the country, clearly witnessed the change in every sphere. This change was supported by the liberal policies of the period. Initially the regular periodical print publication was restricted to the urban elite classes and the rural middle class had to depend on the short-lived 'minor literature'. Hence, the popular newspapers, of a particular sort, commercial and orientated as much towards advertisers as readers, became an established part of print culture in India.

The availability of new print consumer class in all major languages made newspaper and magazine production a much more profitable activity and one which was over time increasingly targeted at lower socio-

*Ramesh Aroli*

economic groups for its readers. Inevitably, there were political implications in the sort of popular journalism which emerged in the post-Emergency period. Incorporation of ‘common’ ordinary people into a commercialized press which had a stake in economic prosperity and capital growth led the popular press to become an institution of political control. And to shape the ideas of this class there were different ideologies—Marxist, Ambedkarite, Gandhian, JP, Loahiaite and Rightwing which were prevalent in Karnataka and were influenced the every creative work and sphere. Since, there is an interlink between the different spheres, it would be more convenient to understand and locate the presence of ideologies in Kannada print culture if they are not seen separately.

In India, post-Emergency years witnessed an unprecedented “newspaper revolution” (?) and new formats of journalism came into existence. A number of political and literary magazines were started in all major Indian languages. Due to political uncertainty and imposition of censorship it caused a suffocating atmosphere for journalism. Especially for print, those were the days of humiliation. This was another important circumstance that determined the role of the press and which played a role of effective opposition due to the one-party- Congress rule, for a long time in the nation. By the end of Emergency, as Jeffery observes, technological change in the form of personal computer and Offset press entered Indian language newspaper industry that caused a drastic transformation. Since then, the questions pertaining to language, region, caste, religion, gender and identity have emerged as a central agenda in Indian politics. And in Karnataka, the generation educated since the beginning of Eighties had come into media-consuming adulthood, which was a “largest cohort of Kannada reading people in history”(2) (1997).

Newspapers have played their own role in the political, social and literary life of the state. Their part in the freedom movement is notable. Newspapers supported the state Unification movement of the region entirely and also fostered emotional integration. Though, not all, at least few small publications have played a very prominent part in propagation of new and progressive thoughts in popularizing the spirit of democracy. Some magazines like, *Sankramana* (1965), *Mungaaru* (1972) *Dalita* (1974), *Shudra* (1975), *Baduku* (1977) *Panchama* and *Andolana* gave a thrust to this development. This reflected in Kannada literature too. As *Boosa* remarks had created a huge uproar in the literary world that furthermore aroused certain fundamental questions about ‘space’ for freedom of expression and language.

For the convenience of the present study, magazines publications may be divided into two categories.

- I. General interest magazines:** a-political, literary; mostly addressing upper middle class/housewives.
- II. Popular magazines:** (including Tabloids) - political/commercial and mostly addressing newly educated lower middle-class.

In the first category, though, there were many popular general interest magazines, mostly sister publications of major Kannada dailies, such as *Karmaveera*, *Prapancha*, *Kasturi*, *Tushara*, *Mangala*, *Sudha*, *Mayura* and *Taranga* with which eminent journalists served as editors, they moulded the reading habits of the middle class by providing a weekly quantity of short stories, serialized novels, cartoons, and light articles. Many prominent Kannada writers got their break while contributing to publications like *Sudha* and some writers continued to write for it even after establishing a name for themselves.

The weekly featured generous illustrations and photographs, and built its own effective circulation system. These periodicals have

Ramesh Aroli

been bringing out special issues on the occasions of festivals and basically targeting the housewives. For example, **Taranga**, another leading Kannada family weekly magazine run by The Manipal Media Network Ltd publishes serials, features, fiction and the interviews of personalities. According to an ABC report(3) the weekly had an average sale of nearly 1.58 lakhs. Compared to the close competitors, **Sudha** and **Prajamata**, the content of **Taranga** was more of health, serials, women's page and children's section. Except **Prajamata** these were all mostly 'family magazines'. **Gandhi Bazaar Patrike**, another journal started by K.N. Balakrishna during Eighties, was a literary journal. Initially, it was in tabloid format which was "dedicated to current affairs" and "always picked up the latest debates, and controversies in the world of Kannada literature(4). And some of these magazines had nationalist perspective, so they were kind of 'serious' in terms of content.



Fig. 3 & 4:

Cover pages of Kannada weeklies *Sudha* (January 11, 1965) *Karmaveera* (June 27, 1971)

Source: Google Images



Before looking at the emergence of popular publications, it is essential to examine popular fiction and pulp novels in Kannada. Till recently, Kannada had a very rich popular pulp, spy-crime novels which were mostly commercial fictions even if these were never considered 'literary' ever. Writers like Narasimhaiah, BK Anantaram, Sudarshan Desai, H K Ananta Rao and Koundinya who wrote this genre of stories were very popular in the Seventies and Eighties. Most of these pulp novels had the usual ingredients and characters; a spy, a vamp that these used to give instant gratification to be read and forgotten. Narasimhaiah had penned over 550 detective novels, and over 50 social novels. '**Pattedara Purushottama**', after the detective-cum-hero of most of his novels, was the first of his novels to be published in 1952. He also wrote three other detectives, '**Pattedara Madhusoodana**', and '**Pattedara Arinja**'. Some of his novels were reprinted eight times and popularized reading habits among lower middle-classes. Sudarshan Muthalik Desai, another writer who had written variety of novels, short stories and nonfiction articles, became popular because of his detective novels like **Keralida Sarpa**, **Kari Naayi**, **Haladi Chelu**, **Bannadha Bekku**, **Apaharana**, **Sarpa Gandha**, **Vichithra Aparadhi**, **Ashti Panjara** and many others. Desai was a voracious reader of Hindi literature so he was influenced by many popular detective novels written in Hindi. Mostly these novels came out of stable publishing houses which were professionally printing handbills/posters and bill books. Being cheap and easily available, these low weighted books became immensely popular among readers in most major Indian languages that generated millions of new readers of fiction in Seventies and Eighties. As television became a medium of entertainment by the end of the 1990s, the attraction for these popular romantic fictions gradually disappeared. H K Ananta Rao, who wrote **Antha** novel which was made into movie in 1981, by S. V. Rajendra Singh Babu went on become a huge success.

Ramesh Aroli

'*Antha*' is considered as the first political cinema in Kannada that created a sensation.

Kannada too has no long history of tabloid press, apparently there were few tabloids edited by nationalists and literary stalwarts in different time period, which was not in 'western sense' of tabloid practice. *Kidi* (spark) edited by Sheshappa is said to be popular in the 1950s. Due to the improper documentation, no information is available about the tabloid. Bringing certain respect to tabloid journalism in Kannada, P. Lankesh created a 'space' for several protest movements and started influencing state politics through *Lankesh Patrike* (1980) reports. Perhaps, it is considered as one of the most important magazines that caught the spirit of this prevailing mood and was successful in expressing it sharply without any adornment. B.V.Vykuntha Raju's *Vara Patrike* became fairly successful with its simple straight and serious handling of public issues. He also used to edit a popular monthly *Rajupatrike*, *Suddi Sangati* of Indudhara Honnapura, *Sanketha* (a fortnightly) of I.K. Jagirdar and M.B.Singh, *Manvantara* of Ashok Babu, *Mardani* of Janagere Venkataramaiah, *Hi Bangalore* of Ravi Belagere, *Abhimani* of T. Venkatesh and *Agni* by Shreedhar, are the other worthy journalistic attempts. Shreedhar's *Agni* began with a tagline *Idu patrikeyalla pratibhataneya astra* (It is not a newspaper; but a protest weapon) has a pro-Dalit identity that to some extent, filled the gap that resulted after the fall of *Lankesh Patrike*.

Despite professional rivalry between 'serious' and 'popular' publications from a different perspective, the globalization of public sphere forced mainstream media to accept the tabloid values and issues that were raised. One of the key factors for the origin of the popular press into distinctively tabloid formats was the rise of radical politics. And interestingly, though, these popular publications were not



Fig: 5 & 6. Cover page of *Lankesh Patrike* first issue published in July in the year 1980. And a collage of cover pages of Kannada tabloids.

‘commercial’, they still survive without advertisements by carrying a cover story, features and part crime and so on. Inspired by the success of *Lankesh Patrike*, a good number of the tabloids were launched and later mostly started banking on – blackmail, sexual vulgarity, carrying semi-nude photos and writing in popular colloquial Kannada that captured the attention of its non-elite audience and more in ‘western’ style.

Also there was a boom in pornographic magazines such as- *Rati Vignana*, *Surati*, *Rati Darpana* and *Police News*. In terms of addressing readers, these too employed a colloquial vernacular and knowing vulgarity and sexualization of content that rendered them a highly distinctive brand in competitive media market. Though, some claim that they publish investigative reports, it is impossible to prove and take any legal actions against coverage of defamatory and damaging reportage. *Star of Bangalore*, *Ikyaranga* (a CPM news letter) *Hello Bangalore*, *Voice of Bangalore*, *Hi Soorya*, *Soorya*, *Dhoota*,

Ramesh Aroli

*Praja Jagattu, Onti chirate, Diggaja, Nagarahavoo, Polisara Horata, Sanmitra, Paalegaara, Police News, Raajakeeyaranga, Sanje sphota, Crime News* to name few but the list goes on. Inevitably, there were political implications in the sort of popular journalism which emerged after political changes occurred and technology available in this period. Importantly, by incorporating the new-educated middle class people into a non-commercialized press which had a stake in economic prosperity and capital growth, popular press became an institution of political control. Before this incorporation, there had been successful attempts to address the “common people” in small and literary periodical publications, representing them and their concerns in direct vernacular aimed at constructing a tangible, effective and radical political community. To counter the very idea of ‘standard’ and ‘literary’ Kannada the new brand of writers from non-dominant communities started adopting a tone and style of addressing in a very informal non-literary Kannada. For instance Siddalingaiah’s poem from *Holemadigara Haadu* (1975) “*Ikkrala Vadirla Aanannmakkla Cherma Ibbala*” (Bash them, Kick them Skin those bastards”(5) was “an attempt to define the new Dalit identity through anger and fury. Anger was a liberating emotion and the experience of violence one of release” as D.R. Nagaraj(6) observes. This strategy helped to establish the convention of articulating an idiom to match an audience which was outside the traditional bourgeois readership targeted by the mainstream press of the time.

Previously, newspapers and magazines had assumed that their readership was a relatively homogeneous upper middle class with varied interests and opinions, characteristic of the range of bourgeois opinion of the time, manifested in their language. Having established an authentic tone of language for the targeted readership, which represented as a

community with common aspirations and values, the popular press developed through the Eighties into a new generation of popular political papers, the most successful and long-lived of which is ***Lankesh Patrike***. The tabloid created a textual community which incorporated petitions and political polemic within a rhetoric, which claimed to speak on behalf of ***Jaana-Jaane***, the smart readers of Karnataka. So, the language had become the site where radical political alternatives were addressed. And it also proved the democratic capability of a popular tabloid publication.

**Table:1 Share in National Circulation (of Newspapers) By Selected States**

<b>State</b>	<b>1964</b>	<b>1978</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1997</b>
Maharashtra	20.08	17.17	14.70	12.62
Tamil Nadu	17.04	9.31	6.49	3.88
West Bengal	11.28	11.73	5.72	5.20
Kerala	10.82	10.95	6.52	5.53
Uttar Pradesh	5.22	6.66	16.32	16.17
Gujarat	5.10	6.52	7.34	6.16
Karnataka	4.47	6.23	4.84	3.66
Andhra Pradesh	3.34	5.24	4.40	4.20
Madhya Pradesh	2.59	3.85	6.73	9.33
Punjab	2.44	3.21	4.50	3.59
Bihar	2.39	3.27	8.81	4.64
Rajasthan	0.37	2.57	3.64	6.19
Orissa	0.37	1.30	3.20	3.86
Assam	0.37	0.88	0.28	1.48

**Source:** RNI, various years in Tara S. Nair, *Growth and Structural Transformation of Newspaper Industry in India: An Empirical Investigation*, EPW, Vol.38, No. 39(Sep.27-oct.3 2003), pp. 4182-4189.

For many years however, regular periodical print publication was restricted to the mostly upper classes and the poor had to find a space in the short-lived 'minor literature'. By now, popular publications of a particular sort, commercial and orientated as much towards advertisers as readers, became an established part of print culture in Karnataka. The lifting of censorship on the press after Emergency made newspaper and magazine production a much more profitable activity that was over time increasingly targeted at lower socio-economic groups for its readership. The language of these new popular commercial newspapers enabled a relationship to give an authentic account of itself to its readers if it was to continue to be successful.

The twentieth century witnessed an unfolding of sentimental fiction made possible by the rapid growth of the popular press, the spread of literacy, and the emergence of a large middle-class readership in Karnataka's urban spaces. It is appropriate to argue that popular publications helped to create an affective rational reading community within the literary public sphere whereby non-dominant castes exchanged private experiences as a mode of protest. Perhaps, the most important point that the Kannada tabloids illustrates is that, a newspaper with or without technological bells and whistles, or whether printed or passed on from hand-to-hand at public places and among the associations interactively it takes many forms. What form it takes will depend on material conditions. And these conditions have kept on changing constantly then and now. Beyond all industrial and economic conditions, the fact remains that the 'popular press' is a linguistic phenomenon in the way that it appeals explicitly to newly educated middle class and their lifestyles.

### FOOT NOTES :

- 1) See When did the populars become tabloids? in *Tabloid Britain: Constructing a Community Through Language*, page
- 2) *Kannada: "We Fake It There Is competition"* EPW, Vol. 32, No. 12 (Mar. 22-28, 1997).
- 3) Audit Bureau of Circulation report 1984
- 4) *An old brew*, The Hindu, Metroplus, September 28, 2013
- 5) See H Govindaiah's chapter in *Steel Nibs Are Sprouting - New Dalit Writing from South India Dossier 2: Telugu and Kannada* edited by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu.
- 6) In *From Political Rage to Cultural Affirmation: Notes on the Kannada Dalit Poet-Activist Siddalingaiah*, *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (WINTER 1994), pp. 15-26

### REFERENCES

1. Assadi, Muzaffar: *Movements and Politics in Karnataka*, in *Karnataka Journal of Politics*, Vol.4, 2004.
2. Aroli, Ramesh : *Print, Politics and Public Sphere: Understanding Indian Popular Press* in *Akademios*, Vol.IX, 2015-16, an academic journal of Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, New Delhi.
3. Chandrashekar, S (2002) *Adhunika Karnatakada Andolanagalu* Namma prakashana, Tiptur. Conboy, Martin (2005) *Tabloid Britain: Constructing a Community Through Language*, Routledge, USA.
4. Gowda, Chandan: *Many Lohias? Appropriations of Lohia in Karnataka*, *Economic and Political Weekly* October 2, 2010 vol xlv no 40.
5. Jeffery, Robin (2003) *India's Newspapers Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian Language Press*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
6. "We Fake It There Is Competition", (*Kannada*) *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 12 (Mar. 22-28, 1997), pp. 566-570
7. Nair, Janaki (2007) *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
8. Raghavan, E, and Manor, James, (2009) *Broadening and Deepening Democracy: Political Innovation in Karnataka*, Routledge, New Delhi.
9. Srinivas, M. N. and Panini, M. N: *Politics and Society in Karnataka*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Jan. 14, 1984).
10. Srinivasaraju, Sugata (2008) *Keeping Faith with the Mother Tongue*, Navakarnataka Publications Pvt Ltd, Bangalore.
11. *The Pen in Revolt*, (1978) Press Institute of India, New Delhi.

12. Udupa, Sahana: *Print communalism : The press and the non-Brahmin movement in early Mysore, 1900–30* in Contributions to Indian Sociology, 2010 44: 265, Feb 18, 2011.
13. Vanalli, Niranjana (2001) *Kannadalli Kale Sahitya Patrikegalu*, (Magazines devoted to Art and Literature in Kannada) Shivarama Karanta Adhyayana Kendra, Puttur.

## End Notes

- i. The word *Tabloid* was introduced into the world of media by Alfred Harmsworth, who picked the term from trademarked by a pill manufacturer; originally coined out of the words tablet and alkaloid.
- ii. Gyan Prakash writes ... Week after week, Blitz exposed truths allegedly buried beneath the surface of random and fragmentary events. The embezzlement of public funds, prostitution rackets, sordid stories of seduction and sex in the name of spiritualism, dark political designs behind high-sounding rhetoric, and the fleecing of the poor by rich industrialists and property developers were staples in the weekly. Even the sports column, called 'Knock Out', took on the racket-busting posture. It was written by A.F.S. Talyarkhan, whose bearded, pipe-in-mouth, face on the page appeared to lend gravity to the charges of malfeasance he made against sports authorities.
- iii. The periodicals which were loyal to literature in a panoptic sense. Little magazines generally used to publish short stories, poetry and essays together with literary criticism, book reviews, and biographical profiles of authors, interviews and letters. The little magazine movement boom and their further publication also range from being published fortnightly to annually, which were generally edited by inexperienced teenagers to experienced eighty year olds. Most of the magazines used to print both poetry and fictions, including even novels and drama. However, particular magazines publish fiction, drama or poetry only. And it was started in West Bengal around 1961, when the Hungry generation Movement transported the cultural establishment to a stormy and uncomfortable domain.
- iv. Dalit and Bandaya are the two most important radical movements of Kannada literature. Dalit writers, mostly, from untouchable castes and Bandaya of young leftist writers began writing in the mid 70s. Various forms of social and economic exploitations were the central themes of their literature.



- v. Gokak agitation was a language rights agitation in the 1980s that took place in Karnataka. Agitation was the first agitation for the language status of the Kannada language in the state. It was named after the committee that was headed by V. K. Gokak. The three language formulae were adopted in the schools of Karnataka since linguistic organization of states in 1956. In the 1960s there was a strong opposition to usage of Hindi language. Sanskrit was the dominant language in schools where students completed their education without having to study Kannada language. This created incompatibility between languages that were used for state administration and education. This led to a linguistic movement against maintaining Sanskrit as the first language in School. This movement was supported by political parties, groups of Kannada teachers, students, college and university professors, playwrights and creative writers.
- vi. A minister for Housing and Municipal Administration in Devaraj Urs cabinet -B. Basavalingappa from a Dalit community remarked that Kannada Literature as *Boosa* (cattle feed) in the function at Mysore organized by Dr. Ambedkar Vichara Vedike and Backward Class Students Forum of University of Mysore, on November 19, 1973. The event famously called Boosa Controversy that caused for decisive turn in Dalit movement in Karnataka. To Basavalingappa that meant the Kannada Literature did not have proper stuff. His contention was that the students coming from exploited sections of the society should learn English.