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Traditional Content and Narrative Structure in the Hindi Commercial Cinema

Abstract

The commercial Hindi cinema has been subjected to domestic and foreign criticism for its exceptionally formulaic and stereotypical feature productions. These productions, however, have their sources in the oral and written epics and the popular dramatic genres of traditional Indian culture. Content borrowed from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, and other pan-Indian tales frequently enlarges and reinterprets the characters and plots of the commercial cinema. The disconcerting emotional melange presented by Hindi films is consistent with aesthetic theories of emotional content found in Indian epic narrative. The stereotyping of characters and of interpersonal relationships reflects the influence of traditional Indian epic structure, while the growing frequency of self-reflexive humor in the medium suggests yet another connection between contemporary Hindi cinema and the historically powerful traditions of Indian drama and narrative.

Key words: Hindi cinema — Indian epics — Rām — mass media — brothers

FOR over eighty years the commercial cinema of India has formed one of the most dominant and distinctive features of the subcontinent's popular culture. The Indian motion picture industry is among the world's largest, with a combined output of between seven hundred and eight hundred films a year. Movies in as many as fifteen different languages are produced in a number of regional centers, including Madras, Bombay, Hyderabad, and Calcutta. The largest percentage of the annual national output is represented by films in Hindi, the most widely understood language on the subcontinent; to the extent that a pan-Indian film style may be said to exist, the commercial Hindi cinema defines that style.

Hindi film stars and film music are famous throughout India and much of southeastern and western Asia, and have influenced mass culture as far away as parts of Europe and Africa. The Hindi cinema is one of the oldest non-Euro-American cinematic traditions in the world — the first Indian-produced feature film, *Rajah Harishchandra* [King Harishchandra],¹ was released in 1913, and Indian sound films appeared in 1927, just four years after the premiere of the world's first sound feature (the American *The Jazz Singer*).

From their very start Hindi sound films have consistently displayed a distinctly formulaic quality. Sudhir Kakar, in his discussion of Hindi cinema's value as fantasy, notes this feature of the genre and its similarity to the traditional fairy tale:

At the conclusion of both [Hindi] films and fairy tales, parents are generally happy and proud, the princess is won, and either the villains are ruefully contrite or their battered bodies satisfactorily litter the landscape [Also] common to both Hindi films and fairy tales is the oversimplification of situations and the elimination of detail The characters of the film are always typical, . . . the Hero and the Villain, the Heroine and Her Best Friend, the Loving Father

and the Cruel Stepmother, are never ambivalent.

(KAKAR 1989, 29)

By the late 1940s an explicitly stated formula had developed centering on two stars, six songs, and three dances. These were bound together by an intensely stereotyped plot and performed by what often appeared to be an entire cast of character actors.

DAYAL blames many of the industry's difficulties, including this perceived lack of creativity, on the extensive government controls that "permeate every facet of film making — from the initial hunt for finance, through the processes of procurement of raw stock, the production of the film, and the censor certificate from the authorities" (1983, 53–54). Government policy has also drawn the criticism of the industry itself, which cites censorship as an obstacle second only to the sometimes crippling tax rates. G. D. Khosla, former Indian chief justice and chairman of an enquiry committee on film censorship, once asked, "In a country where the *lingam* and the *yoni* are publicly worshipped and where a book on *Kama Sutra* has been written [sic], what will happen if a couple is shown kissing as a mark of love and affection? Surely the Ganga will not be on fire!" (RAMACHANDRAN and VENKATESH 1985, 541). Khosla's protests seem to have been in vain — despite the omnipresence of erotically suggestive dancing and the troubling frequency of rape scenes, kissing has remained, until very recently, a rarity in Hindi cinema.

Many critics, however, see the Hindi film industry's problems as in large part internal. Hindi cinema has often been denounced by Westerners and Indians alike as an example of the worst escapist excesses of postcolonial capitalism. As early as 1928 Indian films were described by the Indian Cinematograph Committee as "generally crude in comparison with Western pictures . . . defective in composition, acting and in every respect" (ARMES 1987, 109). Contemporary critics often brand the commercial Hindi output as "over-inflated and often formula-ridden," as shallow commodities created for an uneducated mass audience (ARMES 1987, 121).

Many critics base their positions on neo-Marxist interpretations of mass culture. MANUEL echoes much recent criticism when he states that "film culture, by replicating and idealizing a capitalist, unequal, and consumerist status quo, serves to prevent viewers from grasping the structures of domination, promoting a false consciousness which can be manipulated to elite advantage" (1993, 47). There are, indeed, many motion pictures that fit this description and fully deserve the negative reactions they evoke. Predictable romances and market-driven action features

make Hindi films remarkably easy to dismiss. Limited external competition and constant industry squabbling over territories, prices, taxes, and regulations all create a picture of capitalism at its chaotic and bullying worst.

Such interpretations may, however, be a bit narrow. Hindi films are more than just Western-inspired products of market manipulation — like their Western counterparts, they represent a continuation of their culture's pre-cinema dramatic forms and stories, transformed by the capitalist economy of scale and the power of the mass media. Where they differ from their Western counterparts is in the dramatic traditions from which they emerged. Unlike nineteenth-century Europe or America, India lacked a widespread tradition of realistic theater, either in Hindi or the non-Hindi languages. At the beginning of the twentieth century the non-Hindi traditions included the light-hearted Parsi theater of Bombay, centering on music and dance; like the more rural Marathi *tamāsha*, this style emphasized skits, songs, jokes, and the attractions of the troupe's female dancers rather than the presentation of a single narrative. At the turn of the century one would also have encountered the more serious but equally musical Marathi *natyasangīt* or the traditional (and originally religious) Bengali music-drama *jātra*. These both offered socially or politically relevant tales as well as melodrama.

To most Hindi speakers drama meant traditional styles such as the widespread *nautānkī*, the Rajasthani *khyāl*, the *mānch* (literally, "stage") of Madhya Pradesh, as well as similar regional folk-styles such as the Gujarati *bhavāī*. All were performed by itinerant professional or semi-professional troupes, usually in outdoor settings; all emphasized music and dance. Many offered a series of shorter plays rather than a single long production.

SWANN notes that *nautānkī* and related genres "gathered . . . material from many sources: the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, Rajput stories, the *Purānas* and other Indian legends, Arabic and Persian tales, historical incidents and characters" (1990, 258). In this study I propose that beneath the Westernized gloss of the commercial cinema, and despite its manipulative capitalist tendencies, there are direct connections with the large body of epic stories that exist in oral and written form throughout India. I suggest, too, that it is the continued use of these traditional elements that explains the ongoing popularity of Hindi films. In the present study I will attempt to justify this assertion through an analysis of the characters, story types, and plots of Hindi films, demonstrating the functional similarities of content and narrative structure with traditional Indian epics.

TRADITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THE HINDI CINEMA

In his description of the relationship between the classical version of the great pan-Indian epic *Rāmāyaṇa* and a folk version of the epic from Kerala, BLACKBURN noted that “the folk tradition as a whole provides an interpretive framework for the classical epic text” (1991, 112–13). He notes that the regional variant enlarges upon and reinterprets the identity and meaning of the epic. One can see similar intertextual connections between traditional epics and the Hindi cinema. The epic content in Hindi films, however, usually forms a secondary or allusory subtext rather than the primary text. With the exception of the early mythological genres that overtly recounted epic stories, most Hindi film plots are not explicitly “about” Arjuna, Ālhā, or any other epic hero.

Epic content also interacts with films through a variety of frames imposed by the conventions of commercial cinema and by the nature of popular culture. The standard cinematic frame for films everywhere is the opening portion of the movie itself. Indian sound films have for most of their history opened with a typical film-credit sequence over a static background, to the accompaniment of instrumental music or the film’s main song. The opening of films with what is in effect an acknowledgment of artifice seems more than a simple imitation of English and American precedent — it can be seen, I believe, as the continuation of a custom that has in India always formed part of traditional performance practice.

Moreover, the conventional cinematic frame represented by the credit sequence is itself frequently framed by a distinctly Indian dramatic convention. Almost all Indian narrative performances — folk and court, local and supraregional, romantic and martial — begin with a *mangalachāran*, a religious ritual invocation (BLACKBURN 1991, 120). This device has been adapted by numerous Indian film makers, including Raj Kapoor, whose films (such as his landmark 1951 release *Awara* [Vagabond]) often begin with a lone worshipper — Kapoor’s father, Prithviraj Kapoor — seated before a Śiva *lingam* while an unseen chorus chants “Ōm namahā Śiva.” Only after this cinematic *pūja* does the film commence with the famous “RK” logo, followed by the opening credit sequence.

Although epic content may be framed within cinematic conventions, it is important to note that it can and frequently does enlarge and lend new meaning to the films’ characters and plots. In other words, the intertextual connection between the epics and the Hindi cinema operates in both directions. In the concluding scene of the 1993 release *Khal-Nayak* [Antihero], the film’s hero, Ram (played by Jackie Shroff), is

described by another character (played by Sanjay Dutt) as “he who is [the god] Rām in reality.” Then at Ram’s feet he strikes a pose that mirrors much of the popular iconography of Rām and his divine monkey servant Hanumān. The pose strengthens the link to Rām and to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, of which Rām is the hero. Although no one in or out of the film takes Dutt’s assertion literally (it is clearly part of the cinematic artifice), the director is clearly relying on the audience’s understanding of the intertextual relationship between the traditional/religious Rām of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the cinematic/popular hero Ram to amplify their appreciation of the story and its characters. Simultaneously, however, the image of Rām as a god and as the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is framed by the film fans’ knowledge of actor Shroff’s public life, as reported in film magazines like *Stardust* (“Sexy Shroff’s Most Explosive Interview!” July 1993) and by his previous cinematic roles (especially an earlier role as “Ram” in the 1989 release *Ram-Lakhan* [Rām and Lakhan], in which there were also allusions to the *Rāmāyaṇa*).

The impact of these frames and transformations upon traditional epic content is balanced, if not outweighed, by the added meaning and appeal that traditional content and structure lend to the cinema. Below I will describe a number of traditional epic features — story- and character-types, story content, interpersonal relationships, and humorous reflexivity — and attempt to enumerate the variety of bidirectional transformations that occur when these traditional features are incorporated into the cinematic medium.

TRADITIONAL INDIAN NARRATIVES AND EPICS

Performed narrative takes on an endless variety in contemporary India, from itinerant beggars telling stories on street corners to well-established troupes performing popular genres in the theater. Many oral epics (e.g., *Ālhā*, *Aṃṇanmār*, and *Pābūjī*) follow a general format in which a religious invocation is followed by spoken or declaimed narrative alternating with sung commentary (a format equally common in the Hindi cinema). Epic tales are transmitted in all possible formats and combinations of media, including written texts in classical Sanskrit, oral traditions in regional languages, and, recently, televised narratives in carefully Sanskritized Hindi. Repertoires include ancient martial epics, romances, contemporary history and social issues, and tales drawn from a diversity of religious scriptures. Stories frequently migrate from one medium to another. The tale of King Harishchandra, for example, was a traditional narrative that became part of the secular *naṭāṅkī* theater repertoire during the nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth century moved to

the cinema where, as mentioned above, it provided the plot for the first Indian-produced and directed film. It continues to be performed in some regions as a folk drama under the title *Satyaharīshchandrāyāmū* (MASUD 1987, 12).²

One feature of traditional epics of all types is their great emotionality, and their tendency to portray a wide variety of emotions in sometimes rapid (and, for Western audiences, bewildering or inconsequent) succession. Both of these features have been adopted into the Hindi cinema. The 1958 release *Amardeep* [Eternal flame] provides a typical example of this traditional diversity of emotion (*bhāva*, in terms of Indian aesthetic theory). In this 251-minute narrative, the four longest scenes occupy between ten and eleven minutes each. Two of these lengthy scenes (each of which represents roughly four percent of the total film) are dominated by the emotion of mirth (*hāsa*), but the first of these is an entirely musical introductory segment with song and dance routines featuring first the heroine and then the hero. Of the remaining long scenes, one is dominated by sorrow (*shōka*) and the other (the film's final eleven minutes) is fragmented into anger, wonder, fear, love, and sorrow. In the rest of the film the emotions succeed each other in scenes ranging from one minute to nine minutes in length, with an average duration of four and one-half minutes.

RICHMOND has compared the emotional content in the Indian arts to a banquet or feast in which there is one overall flavor but in which "varieties of feelings and emotions . . . provide the needed variety and texture" (1990, 81). The emotional *mélange* found in films like *Amardeep* can be seen as an expression of a broad theory of dramatic aesthetics based on *rasa*, or abstract emotional types, and *bhāva*, the actual emotions and the stereotyped actions that convey them. While sudden shifts of *bhāva* — from, say, *hāsa* to *shōka* or *rātī* (love) to *jugūpsa* (disgust) — are often viewed negatively by Western critics, they are appreciated by Indian audiences as providing the emotional diversity characteristic of traditional Indian narrative.³

In general, most Indian epic stories demonstrate the ambiguity of the sacred-secular distinction in Indian culture. They may be interpreted as historical or romantic tales on one hand, or as religious allegories on the other, depending on the nature of the context, narrator, and audience. Even narratives that are explicitly secular and nonritual are remarkable not for their avoidance of religious content but for their use of such content within a worldly plot structure and performance context. The Hindi cinema began its career presenting stories that were explicitly or implicitly religious, and there is an historically significant subgenre, the

“mythological” films, that recounts tales of the gods. Modern commercial releases may strain the censorship regulations, yet they abound in miracles, such as interventions by the gods — or in some cases Allah (e.g., *Allah Rakha* [He whom God preserves], 1986). In *Ganga, Jamna, Saraswatī* [Ganga, Jamana, and Saraswatī], the 1988 “comeback” vehicle of actor Amitabh Bachchan, Bachchan’s hero is repeatedly rescued by a supernatural cobra, an animal closely associated with the powerful god Śiva. As the film approaches its conclusion, the divine snake even serves in the rather undistinguished capacity of a rope: Bachchan, who is dangling over a pit filled with alligators, escapes by climbing up the snake and goes on to his final triumphant confrontation with the villain.

EPIC STORY-TYPES AND CHARACTERS

BLACKBURN and FLUECKIGER have noted that Indian epic stories may be broadly categorized as martial, sacrificial, or romantic, and that different genres are often linked to distinctive types of performance contexts (1989, 4). All three epic types have characteristics that are clearly reflected in the cinema.

Martial stories focus on male heroism, power, social obligations, group solidarity, and revenge obtained through physical and political conflict. During the mid-1970s and 1980s Amitabh Bachchan was certainly the most famous martial hero in India. His characters frequently represented the common man fighting to overcome political and financial corruption and abuse of power. The 1985 Manmohan Desai film *Mard* [Man] is one such. As an abandoned child who grows up to fight against British imperialist oppression, Bachchan’s character displays typically martial features. He is a lone hero whose primary associates include his horse and his dog; any additional assistance is received from the gods. The film also employs a dramatic device especially favored by the *nautankī* theater: Bachchan’s character, as we learn in the beginning of the film, is the son of an Indian prince who himself stood steadfast in his opposition to the British. Although the hero does not learn of this until the story’s conclusion, when he defeats the British villains and their Indian collaborators, the audience’s knowledge of his true identity lends him the glamour that mysterious heroes always possess (especially if they are ultimately found to be people of status). *Roop ki Rani, Choron ka Raja* [Queen of beauty, king of thieves] (1993) is a recent example of the martial genre in which both hero and heroine avenge their fathers’ deaths at the hands of the same villain.

Sacrificial epics emphasize the preservation of social norms or mores. Conflicts are usually emotional and internal, and are resolved

either through sacrifice or superhuman endurance and perseverance. BECK, discussing the heroic role in Indian epics, notes that “while a male adventurer-hero usually acts to assert family or caste rights, a heroine is more likely to play the role of protector and guardian of the status quo” (1989, 168). Thus the sacrifice and perseverance in sacrificial tales and films are usually undertaken by female characters: mothers, wronged wives, separated sweethearts, or sometimes courtesans with the proverbial heart of gold. According to LAHIRI, films that “emphasize the . . . nobility of sacrifice and the inevitable triumph of good over evil” are identified in the film industry as “socials,” and are often thought to appeal more to female members of the audience (1983, 36). The famous actress Nargis Dutt portrayed what is perhaps the ultimate politically correct sacrificial heroine in the 1957 release *Mother India* (a remake of the 1940 *Aurat* [Woman]). Persevering against corrupt moneylenders, abandonment, betrayal, monsoons, isolation, and death, Dutt’s character, Radha, provides the inspiration for her son and her village to survive. Regarding Radha in this film, GANDHY and THOMAS comment, “It is important to recognize that, throughout the film, Radha’s ‘power’ or ‘strength’ is integrally bound up with her respect for ‘traditional values’ . . . it is as a paragon of wifely devotion and chastity . . . that she is accorded respect and authority” (1991, 118).

The 1983 film *Sauten ki beti* [Co-wife’s daughter] offers a different view of sacrifice, in which one of the heroines must ultimately commit suicide in order to restore respectability to her co-wife’s daughter. An exception to the generality of female sacrifice is seen in the 1983 *Avataar* [Incarnation], in which the male hero, Rajesh Khanna, displays unusual patience and understanding when confronted by the reprehensible and completely unfilial behavior of his children. The film’s title offers a potential explanation for the hero’s behavior: as an avatar, an incarnation of a god, he would naturally be expected to display greater stoicism than might a martial hero (Bachchan’s martial heroes, in contrast, are renowned for their impulsiveness).

Raj Kapoor’s *Sangam* [Confluence] (1964) might be considered a development on the sacrificial theme, displaying Kapoor’s characteristic manipulation of traditional ideas. DISSANAYAKE and SAHAI (1988, 72) point out that the European scenery in much of the film contrasts with the implicit traditionalist message. The protagonist, played by Rajendra Kumar, first sacrifices his love for his traditional concept of friendship, allowing the heroine to marry his best friend. When the heroine recognizes the protagonist’s sacrifice, she begs him not to interrupt her own sacrifice (she has married someone she does not love, also in the name of

tradition). The hero is forced to commit suicide in order to ensure the success of his initial sacrifice and resolve the instability of the romantic triangle.

Romantic stories are the final category into which both epics and films typically fall. Although most films have a romantic element, films or epics of the specifically romantic-story type espouse such goals as personal freedom and the quest for love. These goals often explicitly challenge social norms or the perceived divisions in Indian society (as in *Bharosa* [Trust], 1940 and *Piya Milan* [Union of lovers], 1985), although sometimes the difficulty is simply parental disapproval (e.g., *Dil* [Heart], 1990). Romances thus present a theoretical contrast to sacrificial films, in which social norms are upheld. In the 1962 *Asli Nakli* [Genuine and false], for example, upper-class Dev Anand stands by his working-class friends and marries his working-class paramour in the face of his rich father's threats of disinheritance. At the film's conclusion, however, the father relents and our hero is restored to his wealthy surroundings. This romance, then, rewards behavior that challenges the social norm of class division.

Such socially challenging behavior is not always successful, however. The date of a film's creation, the nature of the social defiance, and the extenuating circumstances in the plot all affect the final outcome. In fact, the epic category of romance may actually have two subcategories in the Hindi cinema: successful and tragic, depending upon whether or not the hero and heroine are happily united at the film's end. *Ashiqi* [Lover] (1990) is an example of a successful romance, in which the quest for personal freedom and love are fulfilled.

Two successful romances that challenge the traditional Hindu prescription against widow remarriage yet nevertheless illustrate the frequently ambivalent attitude towards the romantic challenge are the 1988 release *Ishwar* [The god Ishwar] and the 1982 *Prem Rog* [The disease of love]. In *Ishwar* the film's protagonist marries the widow heroine. He is mentally retarded, however, and thus operates happily outside of, or perhaps unaware of, the normal social code. In Raj Kapoor's *Prem Rog*, the heroine's first wedding night is carefully depicted so that the audience understands that her initial marriage was never consummated. Thus a cinematically acceptable subterfuge is used to keep the heroine pure for the film's hero, her second husband. Still, the viewers know that Kapoor's actual message is one of protest under socially acceptable situations.

In Hindi tragic romances the only traditionally acceptable fates for the protagonists are death (as in *Ratan* [Jewel], 1944), monastic life (as in

Saraswati Chandra [Saraswati Chandra], 1968), or abandonment. Of these, death is by far the most common. Death in the context of a romantic tale has its precursor in Indian epic narratives, but the significance of such death may have been different than in the cinema. In their discussion of Indian epic types, BLACKBURN and FLUECKIGER note that “heroes and heroines of the romantic epics may die, and even die in battle, but their deaths are without the sociological significance of the deaths in martial or sacrificial epics” (1989, 5). This is not necessarily the case in tragic film romances, where the romantic tendency to challenge established norms is combined with the more conservative conventions of the sacrificial tale — in such films, where one or both of the young lovers are sacrificed for the sake of the norms that have been questioned, the deaths may well take on a social import. An early example is the 1936 *Achhut Kanya* [Untouchable girl], in which an untouchable heroine and a Brahmin hero fall in love, thus challenging the strict and powerful traditions of endogamous marriage based on caste. Hero and heroine both ultimately marry into their own castes, betraying the cinematic ideal of romantic love in order to uphold the norms of society. The film concludes its apparent challenge of caste law by sacrificing the heroine, who is killed trying to save her husband and her beloved. Other movies concluded by the death of the hero and/or heroine are *Mela* [Fair] (1948) and *Do Badan* [Two bodies] (1966), in which the heroines are married by arrangement to the “wrong” man (a man other than the film’s hero). The tremendously popular *Qayaamat se Qayaamat tak* [Now and forever]⁴ (1988) is a recent example in which a socially unacceptable marriage is actually consummated; the challenge to interfamilial enmity is more than the young lovers can overcome, however, and both are dead by the end of the film.

Iqbal Masud has noted the resonance of film romances involving the tragic lovers Lailā and Majnū. Widely known throughout South and Central Asia, this story has been the subject of five Hindi films (*Laila-Majnu*, 1931, 1931, 1945, 1953, 1976) and has provided the thematic material for many more. The religious overtones of the Muslim *Lailā-Majnū* tale are less explicit than those of its Hindu counterpart, the story of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, but both link the notions of romantic and divine love: “Earthly love is a preparation for the heavenly . . . the essential desire of [for] God” (MASUD 1987, 21). The Lailā/Rādhā heroine appears frequently in Hindi films as a romantic and/or tragic cinematic ideal: a beautiful young woman whose longing for union with her beloved compels her to risk all. The heroine of the above-mentioned *Qayaamat se Qayaamat tak* is but one example.

The consequences of Rādhā's dangerous extramarital love for Kṛṣṇa are implied in the *bhaktī* literature that focuses on her longing (*vīraha*) for the god. KINSLEY notes of the story of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa that "many poems portray Rādhā as torn between seeking out Kṛṣṇa and protecting her reputation as a married village woman. Her love for him totally possesses her but is extremely dangerous to reveal" (1986, 86). In the Hindi cinema, conventions mandating the portrayal of social behavior acceptable to censors insure that unchaste females (and sometimes males as well) are disposed of through the accepted routes of death, abandonment, or retreat into religious life. It may be that many tragic romances explicitly portray the socially acceptable resolution to the dilemma posed by Rādhā's "dangerous" love affair with Kṛṣṇa. Such an interpretation moves the discussion of tradition in the Hindi cinema beyond the replication of story-types, raising instead the prospect of what might be labeled thematic reference to specific pan-Indian stories.

EPIC AND TRADITIONAL STORY CONTENT

As mentioned above, Indian drama and cinema has drawn extensively from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the two best known and most widely distributed epics in South Asia. The tales, both central scriptures of the Hindu religion, offer endless patterns that are taken full advantage of in the Hindi films. Together with other pan-Indian tales, they offer primary connective links between contemporary films and audiences on one side, and a centuries-old tradition of religious and social concepts, character types, and themes on the other.

These links are used with varying degrees of intentionality by different film makers. In his 1989 release *Shandaar* [A person of dignity], Vinod Dewan alludes to the fraternal relationships that form one of the central currents in the epic narratives. Both epics involve intrafamily conflict between brothers or other close relations: in the *Mahābhārata* the inherent weaknesses of essentially good characters ultimately lead to civil war, while in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, filial unity is central to overcoming an external threat. Dewan taps the audience's knowledge of this when the elder of the two brothers in *Shandaar*, a police officer, confronts the younger, a smuggler, and declares, "This is supposed to be the *Rāmāyaṇa*, not the *Mahābhārata*!" Two of director Subash Ghai's recent releases, *Ram-Lakhan* (1989) and *Khal-Nayak* (1993), are structured by allusions to these two epics, sometimes in combination.

KINSLEY (1986) has noted the importance of the primary female figures in these two major epics. He suggests that the chaste, long-suffering example of Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the determined revenge-seek-

ing model of Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata* provide the basic models for heroinely behavior in most Indian narratives. So too do they in much of the Hindi cinema. “Sītās” are found, of course, in countless films of the sacrificial type. “Draupadīs” are naturally more common in martial epics, examples being Dimple Kapadia in *Zakhmee Aurat* [Wronged woman] (1988), and Hema Malini in *Durga* [The goddess Durgā] (1984). The heroines of female-centered martial films are often depicted as divinely inspired by, or as actual (but temporary) manifestations of, such militant female goddesses as Durgā and Kālī.

SOCIO-PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Another epic device much borrowed by the film world is that of the triangular relationship. The importance of such relationships in Indian epic narratives is noted by BECK, who suggests that they reveal the central emotional conflicts that the protagonists must resolve in the course of the tale (1989). Although the *Rāmāyana* involves a total of four brothers, it offers a prototypical example of the triadic character relationship, fundamentally composed of a central hero (Rām), secondary male (Rām’s brother Laksman), and female (Rām’s wife Sītā). The three character positions assume specific personality traits and roles within the narrative: 1) the wise, modest, honest elder male (brother), 2) the impetuous, physical, and romantic younger male (brother), and 3) the female, who often provokes one or both of the males into action.

These three classic types, with typically cinematic variations, are present in, for example, the popular 1961 release *Ganga-Jamna* [Ganga and Jamana]. In this classic martial story, a local *zamindar* [landlord] oppresses a family, killing the two parents and appropriating the family’s land. Ganga and Jamana are the two sons who avenge their parents’ murders. In a typical folk treatment of the hero, Ganga is portrayed as well-meaning, impetuous, strong, but not very bright — a “folk Bhima,” in BECK’s analysis (1989, 166). Jamana, his younger brother, is patient and intelligent. The brothers’ bipolar natures are reflected in their appearance and careers: Ganga, large and dark-skinned, wears the peasant costume suitable for a farmer and (later) a bandit, while Jamana, slender and fair, dresses in shirt and trousers and later in a policeman’s uniform. Although circumstances place them on opposite sides of the law, their brotherly relations continue. Ganga dies after finally killing the evil *zamindar*.

The third member of the film’s core triad is Dhanu, Ganga’s par-amour, who both supports and provokes Ganga. Dhanu’s key role as motivator and activator of the bipolar dyad comes when the brothers

meet after Ganga has become a bandit. Jamana convinces Ganga to turn himself in, but Dhanu (by now Ganga's wife, pregnant with his child) is afraid of a future without her husband. She convinces Ganga to return to their forest retreat, leading directly to her death and subsequently to Ganga's death as well.

Secondary triads, another feature of Indian narrative epics, are also common in Hindi films. In *Ganga-Jamna* Jamana is himself the central figure of a secondary triad completed by his own paramour Kamala (the sister of the *zamindar*) and the village schoolmaster. What is especially significant about this triad is that it represents the ultimate triumph of the values championed by Jamana throughout the film: education, obedience, etc. Unlike Dhanu, who mirrors Ganga's peasant qualities, Kamala is an educated, upper-class woman. The schoolmaster is the "elder male" of the relationship, assuming a fatherly quality and personifying the virtues of learning, religion, and patience. The film clearly values these qualities, represented by Jamana, over those personified by Ganga, but, as in many such stories, it requires both aspects to achieve a suitable conclusion. For example, it is Ganga who, with the aid of his bandit gang, breaks up Kamala's arranged wedding to another man — Jamana's law-abiding nature offers no means of thwarting this disastrous event.

A closely related device is represented by the dyads that lend an interesting dynamic to many tales, narrative epics as well as Hindi films. In Yash Chopra's 1975 hit *Deewar* [Wall], Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor portray a bad-elder-brother/good-younger-brother dyad that resembles in many ways the father-and-son pair Bhōja and Devnarāyan in the Rajasthani epic *Devnarāyan*. In both dyads, as in the filial dyad described for *Ganga-Jamna* above, one character's moral, gentlemanly character contrasts with the other's angry impetuosity. In an ending that reverses the conclusion of the Rajasthani epic but replicates the essence of *Ganga-Jamna*, Bachchan dies in his mother's arms, his criminal behavior redeemed by his own death and by the vengeance he has wreaked on the villains for his father's death. As BECK notes, "For heroes and heroines epic death involves a subtle transition rather than either a clear defeat or total victory" (1989, 160).

Folk epics frequently extend the pattern of character relations over a wide range of characters and a number of generations. Here again we see parallels in the Hindi cinema. A 1986 film, *Nagina* [Snake woman], features Sri Devi as the divinely powerful Rajini at the apex of a typical heroine-based triad, with the husband and mother-in-law in the second and third positions. The situation is extended forward into the second generation in the sequel, *Nigahen* [Glances] (1989), in which the core

triad features the original heroine's daughter, Nilam, as the new heroine, with her fiancé and the dead (but still divinely empowered) Rajini in second and third positions (figure 1). In a clever marketing ploy, Sri Devi stars as the heroine in the second film as well. As might be expected from a traditional Indian epic heroine, Rajini and Nilam act as protectors of their homes and husbands.

Triadic relationships seem to be primarily of a heroic nature in

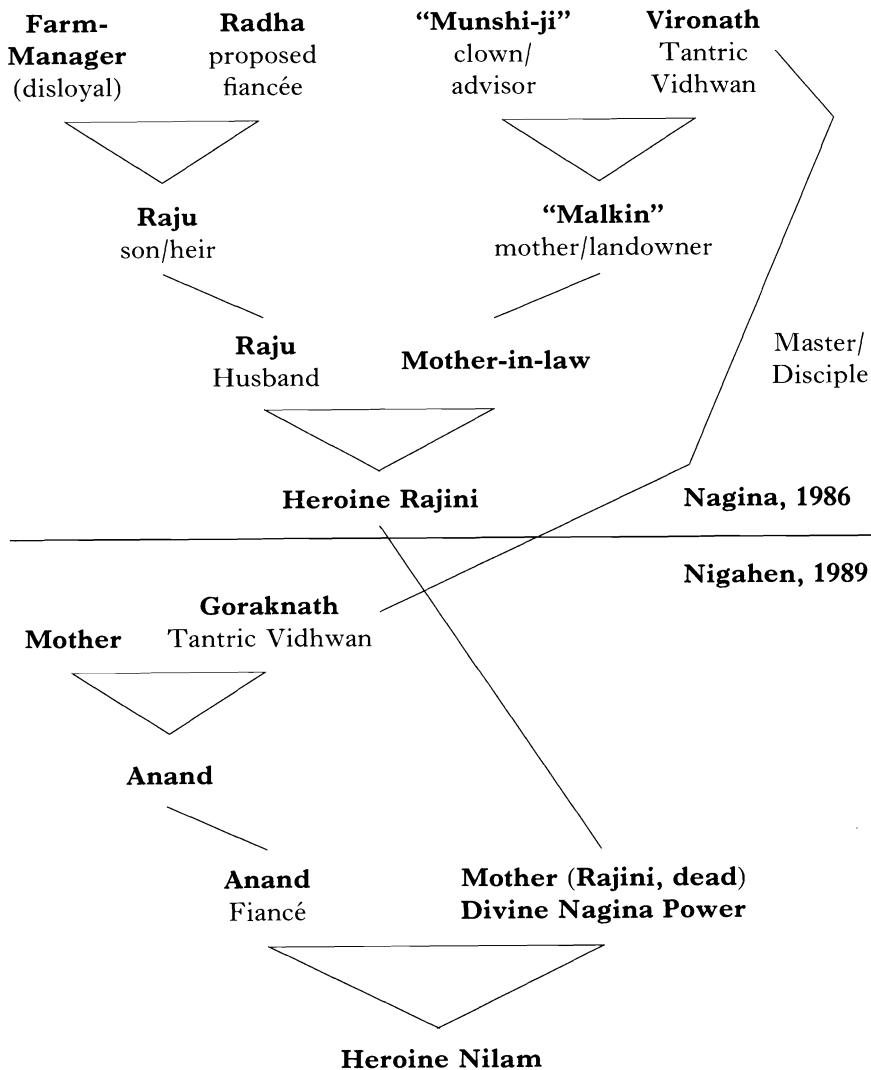


FIGURE 1.

Indian epics; villainous triangles are rare and usually less developed. So too in Hindi films — although head villains are frequently supported by accomplices to form villainous threesomes, there is invariably less interaction among the characters than among the members of heroic triads. Supporting villains fall into a number of categories, including comic villains, villains who early in the plot betray the hero (or his father), female villains or temptresses (vamps), and strong-arm villains. The head villain is almost invariably dead by the film's end. The ends of the respective sub-villains are determined by their nature. Death or arrest are most common for betrayers and violent figures. Comic villains are frequently reformed by the film's end. The fate of a female villain is determined by her relationship to the hero: if she has had a romantic relationship with (or even inclinations toward) the hero, convention calls for her death, often as a sacrifice to save the hero or his beloved (e.g., *Kala Pani* [Black water], 1958).

REFLEXIVE HUMOR

In his account of oral versions of the *Rāmāyana*, Blackburn describes the humorous, ironic, and reflexive twists that narrators add to the story. Reflexivity gains its primary value from the audience's knowledge of the genre or story being performed (or referred to) and from a collective awareness of the performance as artifice. It is, so to speak, an insider's joke, meant specifically for those in the audience who are exceptionally familiar with a particular genre's repertoire. BLACKBURN notes that this type of reflexivity is "especially common in the oral commentary" (1991, 118).

A similar type of humorous reflexivity can be seen in the Hindi cinema. The primary sources and vehicles for this humor are the massively popular film songs, which are nearly omnipresent in contemporary Indian culture. It is unclear just how long such humor has existed — V. A. K. Ranga Rao suggests that it has always been present (personal communication, 1994), but obviously some time must have elapsed before Hindi films and songs grew enough in cultural importance that later films could reflect on their ubiquity. The first humorous use of former film songs that I am aware of occurs in the 1960 release *Bindiya* [Bindiya]. In this film the actor Om Prakash plays a clown role as the local Brahmin pandit. At the inauguration of the hero's new home the pandit performs a *katha*, a religious narrative interspersed with songs that are part entertainment and part commentary. What makes this *katha* particularly interesting is that the songs used by Prakash are all film songs — indeed, his performance is, in effect, a recapitulation of the top

hits of the prior seven years.

The other examples of such reflexive humor that I was able to uncover all occur after 1980. The post-1980 examples, more than the 1960 example mentioned above, tend to reflect on the broader film culture by playing on actor identities as well as film songs. This is clearly exemplified in a song-and-dance sequence near the end of Manmohan Desai's 1981 release *Naseeb* [Destiny]. One of the heroes, Rishi Kapoor, dons the Charlie Chaplin-esque tramp costume made famous by his father, Raj Kapoor, in films like *Awara* [Vagabond] (1951) and *Jaagte Raho* [Stay awake] (1956). To reinforce this reference to his father (as parent, actor, and film-maker), Rishi Kapoor sings "Maybe you think I'm a rustic, maybe you think I'm a joker"; the word joker at the end of this rhyming couplet refers to another of Raj Kapoor's film's, *Mera Naam Joker* [My name is Joker] (1970), in which both Raj and Rishi appeared.

A more open acknowledgment — or perhaps appreciation — of the history and artifice of Hindi cinema is found in an extended and highly reflexive song sequence in the opening minutes of the 1991 *Pathar ki Phool* [Flowers of remembrance]. The young hero and heroine board a video-coach, a widespread phenomenon in South and Southeast Asia in which the tedium of long bus rides is relieved (or compounded, depending on one's perspective) by video versions of popular films. The audience then watches as the main characters view a film containing a fantasy-song sequence — itself a convention in Hindi cinema — in which the hero and heroine perform a series of famous songs and roles from popular early Hindi films, complete with appropriate costume changes and movie-poster backgrounds.

One of the most recent and sophisticated reflexive twists noted in Hindi films occurs in Subash Ghai's 1993 *Khal-Nayak* [Antihero], in which Madhuri Dixit plays the heroine Ganga to Jackie Shroff's Ram. Ganga, having disguised herself as a prostitute and accompanied the villains in flight, engages the gang in a game based on a familiarity with film songs (such games, called *antākshari*, are actually played in northern India, and even form the basis of a television game show). The songs chosen by Ganga in her pretense of drunkenness play on her name and situation, on Ram's name, and on events in earlier films (including those featuring Dixit and Shroff). One of her most complex choices is the song "Rām terī Ganga mailī hogāi" [Lord Rām, your Ganga (river) has become polluted] from the 1985 film of the same title. The choice immediately reflects on Ganga's pollution due to her association with the villains. The 1985 film, in turn, plays on its own heroine's name (Ganga), on the name of the holy river, and on the state of contemporary Indian politics.

That film's heroine, too, sings the song in the midst of a band of villains. Moreover, the hero of *Khal-Nayak* is named Ram, making the song even more cinematically appropriate than in the original film. References encompassed by the song thus include the god Rām invoked by the original song, the 1985 film and its heroine Ganga, the current Ganga's predicament, and the name of her hero (Ram), already associated with the divine Rām and with the *Rāmāyana*.

Judging from my experience with Hindi films, the 1960 example referred to above is an early and isolated instance of the reflexive humor found in many traditional Indian narrative forms. Regardless of when the phenomenon first appeared, however, such humor does seem to have become more frequent over the last fifteen years.

CONCLUSION

When the Hindi film industry started in the early twentieth century, a wide variety of traditional dramatic genres still existed in the cities and villages of India, filling many different social, historical, and religious functions. That the Hindi cinema has played an important role in the decline and even extinction of many of these dramatic forms is unquestionable. In the process, however, the commercial cinema has absorbed many of the themes and textual conventions of traditional drama, utilizing them as a structural and thematic basis for countless Hindi films. Hindi cinema shares with its epic and traditional predecessors an inclination for emotional variety and stereotyped characters, along with a limited repertoire of themes and a consistent vocabulary of plot developments. These attributes, as noted above, have provoked much criticism, but they may actually be among the most "Indian" aspects of Hindi films. It seems ironical that for many critics a major failing of the Hindi commercial cinema is the very fact that it incorporates traditional, indigenous attributes into a modern, Euro-American mass medium.

Traditional narrative is a living performance often set within a calendric performance cycle and serving an explicitly devotional or ritual function. These factors, combined with the itinerant nature of many of the traditional troupes, may have helped lessen the negative impact of the type of formulaic features described above. These extenuating factors are absent in the case of a cinematic production. Instead of a live performance that occupies part of a ritual, celebratory, or even purely entertainment-oriented social event, and that is viewed once or twice a year by a limited number of individuals, a Hindi film is shown three or four times daily to thousands of otherwise unrelated viewers in theaters throughout North India.

Indian viewers of traditional drama may attend countless retellings of epics such as the *Rāmāyana* expecting not that they will hear a new story, but that the tales' familiar characters and themes will revitalize their view of themselves and the world. Despite certain differences, the Hindi cinema fulfills the same expectation. By nature, mass-media marketing requires a constant supply of new product; even if the plot, the theme, and the characters remain the same, the product itself must be new, with new fashions, new faces, and new songs. Yet though the cinematic package (title, setting, stars, plot details, songs, etc.) may be different, inside the package the message is familiar and, perhaps, comforting in the increasingly stressful world of contemporary India. In spite of their role in a cynical, capitalist industry, and in spite of their sometimes stultifying content, Hindi films are located by their traditional content and narrative conventions within an old and deeply rooted set of Indian cultural meanings and values.

NOTES

I would like to express my thanks to William Sax (University of Canterbury, N.Z.) and Philip Lutgendorf (University of Iowa, U.S.A.) for their insightful comments on drafts of this article, and to V. A. K. Ranga Rao of Madras for sharing with me his knowledge of the finer points of Hindi film history.

1. In this paper all Hindi words and terms are transliterated according to the system shown in FREITAG (1989, xvii-xviii). Personal names, place-names, names of languages, and the names of film characters are printed without diacritics in normal type (e.g., Ram, Dhanu, etc.). The names of epic characters, Indian castes, and deities are printed in normal type but with diacritics (e.g., Rām, Sītā, etc.). The titles of epics and all other Hindi words are printed in italics with diacritics (e.g., *Mahābhārata*, *mangalachāran*, etc.). The titles of Hindi films are italicized, but are transliterated without diacritics, using the Anglicized spellings of their Hindi names devised by Indian publicists for English-language labels. These are the spellings under which one would locate these films in an Indian video store. The titles are followed by English translations, bracketed, in normal type with diacritics when necessary. This system, although consistent, will occasionally lead to incongruities, such as when the main characters of the film Ganga-Jamna are referred to as Ganga and Jamana.

2. The history of India's first film capsulizes many of the points made in this article. The story began its career as part of the religio-historical epic, the *Mahābhārata*. Subsequent to its status as a *nauṭāṅkī* story, folk drama, and feature film, it formed part of the 1990 mythological *Vishvamitra*, which was broadcast serially on Indian television.

3. I would like to thank Philip Lutgendorf for pointing out this correlation.

4. This title literally means "From the Day of Judgement (*qayamat*) to the Day of Judgement." I have translated the title according to my perception of its implied meaning.

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