

FOUR-METER-HIGH GODS AND HEROES: MYTHOLOGICAL BODIES

LINDA ANNE HEMPHILL

Independent Scholar
linda@lindahemphill.com

Received: 14-05-2017

Accepted: 17-10-2017

**ABSTRACT**

The earliest genre of Indian film, the Mythological, presented the gods and heroes from the myths and epics of Hinduism in a new medium, with all the entrancing corporeality that the cinema screen suggested. Audience reception, to be found in an energetic culture of newspaper review, over time expresses not only the changing tastes of a maturing filmic critical faculty, but the way in which this feedback influenced cinematic portrayals, often leading to an eventual transmogrification of beloved characters. The physical representation on the screen of the bodies of divinities and avatars presented different problems to producers as their concerns grew to encompass not only censorship, but competition from other increasingly popular genres; such as the social genre film, in which sexuality could be scrutinized by the audience while prudently censored. Films of such genres came to accommodate those physical types that had long been a staple of the Mythological genre, its champions and villains, along with its stories; without the growing confusion that the Mythological genre displayed in the physical portrayal of characters, or in faithfulness to character histories or even names. The alterations over the period of the genre's dominance and decline, to clothing, sexuality and personal relationships, extended to the representation of myth and epic in other mediums, that of picture books and television, the two worlds in which the Mythological genre was reincarnated.

KEYWORDS: Film, Mythological, epic, myth, Krishna, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, sexuality.

RESUMEN: *Dioses y héroes de cuatro metros: cuerpos mitológicos*

El primer género que existió en el cine indio, el mitológico, nos presentaba a los dioses y héroes de los mitos y epopeyas hindúes en un medio nuevo, con toda la corporeidad deslumbrante que ofrecía la pantalla de cine. La recepción de la audiencia, reflejada en una cultura de crítica periodística efervescente, expresa no solo los gustos cambiantes de una facultad crítica cinematográfica en proceso de crecimiento a lo largo de este periodo, sino también la forma en la que esta retroalimentación influyó en las representaciones cinematográficas, lo que a menudo se traducía en una metamorfosis de los personajes más apreciados. La representación física en la pantalla de los cuerpos de divinidades y sus reencarnaciones planteaban problemas diversos a los productores, cuyas preocupaciones crecían no solo en lo que a sortear la censura se refiere, sino también a la hora de competir con otros géneros cada vez más populares, como las películas de carácter social, en las que la sexualidad podía ser escrutada por la audiencia a la vez que simultáneamente se censuraba la lascivia. Las películas que pertenecían a esos géneros ofrecían una tipología física que durante mucho tiempo había sido un elemento fundamental del género mitológico, sus campeones y sus villanos, junto con las historias en las que se inscribían; todo ello, además, sin la confusión cada vez más acentuada que ofrecía el género mitológico en cuanto a la representación física de los personajes, o en referencia a la fidelidad a las historias de personajes o incluso a sus nombres. Los cambios durante el período de hegemonía y declive del género, en la vestimenta, la sexualidad y las

relaciones personales, se extendieron a la representación del mito y la épica en otros medios, de los libros ilustrados a la televisión, los dos mundos en los que se reencarnó el género mitológico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cine, mitológico, épico, mito, Krishna, Mahabharata, Ramayana, sexualidad.

Introduction

Films, moving pictures, *chalchitra* are entertainment, but they also fulfill a basic human desire to observe facial movement and the engagement of the human body in activity. The Mythological film, with its seemingly inexhaustible stream of beloved epic and *puranic* stories, was the first film genre produced in India, initially with storylines adopted from the popular plays of Parsi theatre. The early dominance of the Mythological genre was undermined by many factors such as the economic influence of collapsing studio systems, but an intrinsic cause of its downfall was its own inventiveness, accompanied by an audience awareness that the epic and mythic characters striding across the silver screen were all too open to ridicule. They were reduced in stature by fan literature that provided an off-screen body for any god; and by films of different genres in which the physique of beloved epic characters was transformed by modern day dress. The introduction of sound removed the austerity accompanying the silence of the gods and heroes, with close-ups of human faces to which make-up failed to give the spark of divinity. The path from actor to god to star led to an all-too human falling from grace. Corporeal screen representation of epic and mythic characters, and the suspended belief that held them there, fell away, with the flickering tinsel no longer a refuge for divinities and champions.¹

Appearances

The physical representation of Mythological figures in early films posed quite different challenges to those that surfaced later in the genre's development. The depiction of Mythological film characters both influenced, and was influenced by, the mythological images painted by Ravi Varma (1848-1906) and the heirs to his style; including Chinese and Japanese modelers of Hindu deities for export to India, to whom 'a garbled iconography' was of less concern than figure, pose and grouping (Mitter, 1994: 215). As Rama and Sita do not appear in either traditional painting or statuary with anything like the frequency of,

¹ Only remnants of a few silent-era Mythologicals survive, and the survival rate from early talkies is low. However, Mythological song-books held at the National Film Archive of India at Pune, and surviving stills do allow remote access to the films. Newspaper and journal reviews, and advertisements that are held at the NFAI give a clear indication of the intentions of filmmakers, and of contemporary reception of films.

for example, Radha and Krishna, the image held of the divine couple in popular imagination has not only come from pictorial representations such as those of Varma's school, but from successful Mythologicals themselves, and criticism was harsh if films strayed from similar representation. A disapproving reviewer of *Seeta* (1933) found that the film 'failed to impress due to physical inconsistency with the well-known and fondly cherished image of our ever-beloved Seeta as is described in the epic' ('An impression of "Seeta"').² Another critic stated that an actress in *Hanuman* (1948), 'slanders our conception of Seeta as she lacks the dignity and majesty of India's greatest woman of ancient times ... Imagine a goddess having Nirupa Roy's face!' ('Ranjit shows monkey tricks on the screen. "Jai Hanuman" becomes popular draw!'). Conversely, while Prem Adib and Shobhana Samarth were acclaimed by audiences for their personification of Rama and Sita in *Ramrajya* (1943), later, when Adib directed and starred in *Ram Vivah* (1949), again alongside Samarth, a reviewer was unhappy with the physical representation of the divine couple; Rama looking 'like a fat barfi-walla', Sita resembling her 'unknown grandmother', and Lakshmana as 'the old-toothed Umakant' ("Ram Vivah" is just old junk! Picture fails to appeal!). Similarly, a reviewer of *Ayodhyapati* (1956) found Rama 'gawky', Seeta like 'an advertisement canvasser for newspapers', and Lakshmana to resemble 'a member of a small town football team' ("Ayodhyapati" becomes a mild mythological: picture fails to thrill picturegoers'). The enthralling novelty of the screen's larger-than-life-size figures of gods and heroes had given way to an awareness of their reduction through the representation of them by actors with well-known human foibles; one reason for the choice of unknown actor to take leading roles in television's *Ramayan* (Sagar, 1987). The poster and calendar art of artists such as Varma had become so much a part of popular iconography that artwork of the pamphlets accompanying *Ramayan* DVDs depicted a smiling Shiva's matted locks as cascading curls, and his plump and hairless blue cheeks suffused with a pink blush. The ambivalent nature of the great god was buried beneath a candy-floss physicality. The revealing wardrobes of earlier Mythological females had also given way; to well-clad goddesses, apsaras or heavenly nymphs, and humans.

² Anonymous reviews and advertisements are contemporary with the films they critique unless otherwise stated. Song-books referred to are listed in works cited. Sound films discussed are from Hindi cinema.

Sexuality

Early screen portrayals of the female body by men dressed as women presented a problem for filmmakers that India's first director, Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (1870-1944), identified as 'moustaches constitut[ing] the main difference between actors' (Phalke, 1918: 77). He understood that casting males as females had drawbacks in 'the new plays [films]' that it had not had on the stage where, 'one can easily forget an actor's age, height and physique if the dialogue spoken by him is spicy, poetic and in keeping with the character's temperament' (Phalke, 1918: 80-81). Although women did occasionally appear in film, for example, Marian Hill in *Keechaka Vadham* (1916) (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1994: 142), their general absence from the screen resulted in difficulties with costume under audience scrutiny. The strange complaint made by producers, that of problems in obtaining 'reasonably correct historical data about dress' (Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927-8: 135), must have been prompted by their difficulty in recreating the sexually alluring costumes to be found in art based on myth; when these were draped on male bodies recruited to impersonate the forms of apsaras. This dilemma was highlighted as early as *Raja Harischandra* (Phalke, 1913), in which Phalke attempted a forerunner of the wet sari scene, with a male actor as the queen emerging from her bath (Government of India, 1998: 17).

The employment of actresses in Mythologicals resulted in quite different difficulties, such as the notoriety earned by a nude shot of the actress Sakina in *Mahasati Anasuya* (1921) (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1994: 226), and the nudity and 'erotic' images shot in Italy for *Savitri* (1923), but cut by the censors (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1994: 227). A decade later, the claim in the song-book for *Devi Devayani* (1931), that Devayani is like a son to her father, is belied by a still from the song-book in which Devyani's tight dhoti enhances her figure, and her hair flows loosely. Here, as in a great number of films, loose hair is employed as 'a secular symbol of sexual attractiveness ... sexual receptiveness' (Lang, 1995: 46). In stills from *Sairandhri* (1933), Kicaka grabs the heroine by her loosely falling hair and uses it to drag her. (Vatve, 1993: 73; Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1994: 75). This film's sexuality is at other times more explicit, as in the court scene in which five women, with minimal upper garments and bare lower legs, dance by pillars decorated with paintings of naked women (Anon, "Sairandhri" still, 1963; Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1994: 75). These concessions to the growing competition from other film genres, in which

audience disapproval of alluring ‘vamps’ was relished, and sexy item numbers applauded as much as screen kissing was frowned upon, suggest sexuality was popular at the box office, whatever the genre.

By the late ‘30s, however, criticism began to be voiced over ‘goddesses and other revered females dressed as temptingly as actresses in other films’ (Rangoonwalla, 1979: 16). *Dhruva Kumar* (1938) was criticized because ‘the dance by Anglo-Indian girls was revolting to [the] Indian mind’ (“Dhruva Kumar”). *Shree Krishnarjun Yuddha* (1945) was condemned for Subhadra’s dance ‘to the point of frivolous flirtation ... a portrayal not entirely in keeping with the dignity of our mythological heroines ... most disgusting when she starts waving her hands’ (“Krishnarjun Yuddha” presents a dancer story: boring story, bad direction, rotten music’). *Rukmini Swayamvar* (1946) was lambasted for being ‘a stupid affair from the beginning to the end ... a boy meets girl romance presented in frivolous terms’ (“Rukmini Swayamvar” proves intensely boring. An all round rotten picture’).

Even apsarases’ sexuality, their defining attribute, began to alter on the screen, as the synopsis of the song-book for *Mahasati Tulsi Vrinda* (1947) makes clear. Jalandhara, who wants to kill Vishnu, marries Vrinda, Vishnu’s devotee in a previous life. Jalandhara has married on the advice of his friend Rahu, whose name would seem to have been suggested to filmmakers by the demon Rahu’s antagonism towards Vishnu. When Jalandhara realizes that he is being thwarted by Vrinda’s devotion, he abandons her in the jungle. Vishnu arrives just as Vrinda is ‘breathing her last’, to give her water, at which point Jalandhara suddenly returns and captures him. This last detail reveals filmmaker self-censorship, when contrasted with its mythic source. In the film, the importance of Vrinda’s devotion has replaced that of her chastity, and Vishnu’s offer of water has replaced his mythic offer of sex. This knowledge of the myth colors Jalandhara’s unexpected arrival in the film in such a way that sub-textually he becomes an outraged and cuckolded husband. Here, the myth has been sanitized by film, but audience awareness contributes a salacious layer. Menaka’s image in *Vishwamitra* (1952) underwent a similar sanitization, judging by an advertisement in which Vishwamitra is a hirsute, wild-eyed sage, and Menaka is a demure maiden absorbed in making a flower garland, a halo of light behind her head. (“Vishwamitra”: a prodigy of the creative talent of master director of India’).

The audience for Mythologicals knew the mythic detail that was being replaced, and was not always pleased. A reviewer of *Tilottama* (1954) found that it had failed to reveal

Tilottama's 'voluptuous beauty and powers of seduction', especially in the apsarases' dance sequences, which lacked 'the allure one would expect' ('Music redeeming feature of "Tilottama"'). However, the line between acclaimed and censured screen portrayals of sexuality proved increasingly difficult for filmmakers to judge. While sexuality remained generally implicit, as in *Vaman Avatar/Bali Raja* (Desai, 1955), in which Indra's arms encompass two women, attempts to be more obvious drew criticism. A review of *Shankar Sita Anasuya* (1965) described the trinity 'asking for physical pleasure from their hostess,' whose blouse is considered too shiny, while 'in a grotesque dance number Madhumati and Helen prove to be living anachronisms of the mythological' ('Mixture of myths in "Shankar, Sita, Anasuya"').

Paralleling developments taking place in social genre films set in the modern day, the association of sex with wrongdoing in Mythologicals sometimes allowed for simultaneous enjoyment and condemnation. In *Sampoorna Ramayana* (Wadia, 1961), Surpanakha dances seductively prior to Lakshmana's spurning of her. In the song-book for *Bharat Milap* (1965), Kaikeyi is said to have been 'criminal minded' as she 'adorned the four walls of the "Kop Bhawan" [boudoir]', to exploit her sexuality.

The relationship between Radha and Krishna encapsulates the changing depiction of sexuality in Mythologicals over the decades. The song-book for *Muraliwala* (1927) states that 'Radha's fondness for Krishna verged on madness and since she was a married woman ... it gave rise to all sorts of scandals'. Krishna attempts to placate her jealous husband by suggesting that the husband should 'cease loving Radha in a physical sense and...learn to love her soul'. An article celebrating actor Shahu Modak's 70th birthday recalled the relationship of his Krishna with Radha, in *Shyam Sundar* (1932), as 'a teenage love story' ("Shyam Sunder", 1989). *Gokul* (1946) was the last Mythological produced by Prabhat, a studio renowned for its extravagantly produced Mythologicals, including *Sairandhri* (1933), India's first fully color feature. In *Gokul*, the young and beautiful Radha holds hands and dances with Krishna while gazing into his eyes, and leans against his chest with her arm in his lap, his arm around her (Vatve, 1993: 260-61). An advertisement for *Muraliwala* (1951) shows a similar pose ('Superb mythological musicals for the season: "Murliwala" and "Bhola Shankar"'), and its song-book cover has the handsome, young Shashi Kapoor cheek to cheek with an equally cosmetic-laden Radha.

In parallel developments, however, other Mythologicals based on stories of Krishna and Radha increasingly denied any sensual relationship. Song-book stills from *Radha Krishna* (1933) depict Krishna as a child. The song-book synopsis refers to the jealousy of Radha's husband over her love of Krishna; an oblique surviving reference to previous depictions of their relationship. In *Gopal Krishna*, Radha is given a maternal role (Damle & Fattelal, 1938). The cover of the song-book for *Nand Kishore* (1951), depicts Krishna as a child, and Radha as a young woman. A 'preview article' advertising *Radha Krishna* (1954) describes Krishna's birth when 'Radha, one of the women of Nandgaon and exceedingly beautiful to look at, came rushing to the house of Yashoda. Overjoyed at the birth of the Lord, she took him in her arms' ("Radha Krishna": a maid's undying devotion'). The song-book cover for *Krishnavatar* (1964), careful to alienate no one, depicts Krishna surrounded by drawings that include the figure of a sprawling buxom woman, while its synopsis describes Krishna's youth as one 'of pure love without lust'. The image of Krishna as lover of Radha, let alone of many wives, especially sixteen thousand odd, was awkward to accommodate.

While Mythologicals did not include many of the extensive 'bodice-ripping' elements to be found in the tales upon which they were based, they did include the fantasy-scape of the material upon which they drew. What was obscured by the filmic retelling was apparent to the audience, 'that sub-stratum that they share, the level of collective cultural fantasy' (O'Flaherty, 1981: 23).

Evolution

When the word mythology is associated with Greece, Rome and Egypt, dead religions are called to mind, those once-powerful gods, alive in literary allusion, but no longer worshipped. In India, the terms myth and epic refer to a more animated reality, one in which gods and heroes walk the earth. Just as every Indian is a genealogist, able to discern family origins from a name, many Indians are also mythic and epic genealogists, brought up from birth on epic poetry and *puranic* myth, and surrounded by allusions to them in architecture, sculpture and painting. They are well aware of characters' complicated relations and have a strong grasp of the commonest of the many names that a single character may go by. They know, for example, that Candrabhanu is both the name of a lover of Krishna, and of one of his sons; that Arjuna's many names include Partha and Vijaya, the latter referring also to

Arjuna's brothers Bhima and Yudhishtira (this also the name of many characters) including one of the sons of Dhritarashtra who fought at Kurukshetra. However, many Indians born after WWII, and brought up on Mythologicals that included interpolations, have a knowledge of mythology that is tempered by film.

Film needed to trim and rewrite myth and epic so as to cater to the twin demands of film duration and censorship. A growing audience dissatisfaction with this, however, appears to have stemmed partly from filmmakers moving too quickly in the manipulation of the mythic and epic material. The filmic misreading of traditional myths and characters triggered indignant reviews if an insult to a respected character was perceived. A retrospective review of *Gaja Gauri* (1926) referred to a 'stupid' portrayal of Drona, who 'should have revealed dignity, learning and venerableness' ("Gaj Gauri" a fairly well-made mythological: modest but sincere portrayal of a "Mahabharat tale", 1959). In *Taramati* (1945), 'strange sequences' were identified, in which Narada was rendered 'effeminate' ("Taramati" fails to move! Beautiful sets don't help the story!). Similarly, *Kurukshetra* (1945) was condemned in a harsh two-page review for its 'effeminate-looking Arjuna' ("Kurukshetra" provides splitting headache! A disgustingly stupid film concoction! Shamli makes a good impression!). A reviewer of *Subhadra* (1946) complained that Narada was treated 'in a manner that must remain a standing insult to the great sage' ("Subhadra" imposing presentation of barren theme! Shanta Apte gives excellent performance').

Filmmakers increasingly alienated audiences by their introduction into Mythologicals of fabricated material and invented characters, when there was already a vast and familiar cast from which to choose. This filmmaker initiative was consistent with Indian story-telling traditions of accretion and variation, including Parsi theatre in which Vishvamitra travelled to the land of the fairies in *Harischandra* (Gupt, 2005: 185). However, the extent and the speed of film dissemination led to exponential change. At times a film's epic or mythological underpinnings were lost in complete and unrelated fabrication, accompanied by the loss of characters based in a timeless past.

The new characters that began to appear in Mythologicals initially had names derived from mythic and epic source material but, over the years, these increasingly became more modern and prosaic. Several Mythologicals were underpinned by *Vikram Vilas*, a popular play from Parsi theatre with a 'very peculiar' plot (Gupt, 2005: 71). In Kohinoor's *Vikram Urvashi* (1920), the heroine's name was changed from Madanmanjari to the more

suggestive name of an apsaras; and in *Manthan* (1941), it became the more pedestrian Sashi. While names from myth continued to be drawn upon, such as that of Arishtanema perhaps having suggested that of 'Aishtanemi, a bad king' in *Laxmi Narayan* (Bhatt, 1951), films of the '50s increasingly employed more common modern names. The names of Chandan, Ketu, Malyagiri, Ratnadev, Ratnavali and Vijay appeared in *Durga Pooja* (Dhirubhai, 1954); and *Sakshi Gopal* (1957) included in the *dramatis personae* Madhavi and Venu. While *Shree Krishna Bhakti* (1955) focused on a devotee of Krishna named Cetu, his antagonist is the 'boastful Brahmin' Balbhadra Shastri. The association of Krishna with Balabhadra, one of the names of Balarama, seems the most likely explanation of the source for this character's name, a mythic title reserved for yet another villain.

Krishna as seen on the screen came to be surrounded by a veritable host of new characters. The song-book for *Muraliwala* (1927) gives the name of Radha's husband as Raman. His confrontation with Krishna takes place immediately before the battle with Kaliya, so it is likely that his name was suggested by Ramana, the island to which Kaliya retreated in myth. In the song-book for *Krishnavatar* (1932), 'Kamsa's favorite pimp [is] forced to marry Kubja, whom he does not love on account of her black skin'; the name Kubja very likely derived from that of the ugly child widow who later became the apsaras, Tilottama. Kamsa is also provided with a new wife, a good woman named Pushti, her name suggested by a wife of Dharma, he having fainted earlier in the synopsis. The film includes the usual wrestling match, but instead of Krishna and Balarama killing Canura and Mustika respectively, Vasudeva kills Jimut, his name provided by Jimuta, the wrestler defeated by Bhima while disguised as Vallabha. The song-book for *Gopal Krishna* (V.G. Damle and S. Fattelal, 1938) emphasizes that the asura Kesi is now brother to Kamsa, the latter replacing Indra as the cause of the flood. These are not instances of the use of disguise as a spur to action, so beloved in epic and myth and in earlier Mythologicals, but steps towards effacing from the cinema screen a host of characters.

At times, names revealed little lineage, and were carelessly appropriated from earlier Mythologicals; as was the case with Anaya, the name of a good farmer in *Gopal Krishna* (1938), which then became the name of Radha's husband in *Muraliwala* (1951). In *Rukmini Swayamvar* (1946), Rukmini's father Bhisimaka has been replaced by the queen 'Shudhmati', to create a role for actress Durga Khote. *Shree Ganesh Mahima* (Wadia, 1950) includes the revelation of the world in Krishna's mouth, not to the residents of Yashoda, but

to those of Kailasa. Once a storyline or character was invented for the screen, it seemed to take on a life of its own. For example, Mansukh, Krishna's companion in *Muraliwala* (1951), reappeared in *Radha Krishna* (1954). At times, many different storylines and characters became interwoven, threaded through with invented characters. *Shree Ganesh* (Dharwadkar, 1962) for example, confused the story of Krishna's marriage to Rukmini with that of Satyabhama and the Syamantaka jewel, to the extent that Satyabhama's father is violently opposed to her union with Krishna, but instead of Shishupala as the contending suitor, the rival is called Satdharma.

After appearing on the screen once, new stories became a part of the film world's own mythology, and new characters took on life. Successful films generated remakes, and films fed upon earlier films, resulting in dramatic transformation or complete abandonment of purported source material. *The Mahabharata* particularly accrued popular screen characters and story lines. One popular plot involved a battle between Arjuna and his son, Babhruvahana, early appearing in *Veer Babruvahan* (1934). The film's song-book muddle of a story indicates that Ulupi has lost both her son and her reputation, while Babhruvahana, has gained 'a beautiful wife Sulochana'. It also includes a completely unrelated, interpolation. Two friends marry and must daily inflict seven blows of a shoe on their husbands. One wife is distracted by her husband and forgets. The other 'filed a complaint against [her husband] for breach of matrimonial condition before Babhruvahana, who rebuked her and asked her to obey her husband'. While an example of the irreverent in the Mythological genre, this accretion also demonstrates a concern for the duties of an obedient wife, a theme that became a dominant one in film genres that developed from the Mythological.

However, the immediate effect of such embellishment was that such stories resulted in displacement of whole realms of notable figures. By the time of *Veer Babruvahan* (1950), Ulupi has completely disappeared from the plot, and the cause of the battle has become Arjuna's desertion of Babhruvahana's mother before his birth, after which Arjuna returns. He accuses her of infidelity and again deserts her, in imitation of Sita's suffering. This scenario became an important element of social genre films, that of the struggling mother rearing her son alone.

Makers of Mythologicals based on the *Mahabharata* increasingly confused deities and avatars, as well as humans. The song-book synopsis for *Pandava Nirvan/Pandava*

Agyathavas (1930), describes the assumption by the Pandavas of their cosmic forms. However, Draupadi is not Vishnu's Shri, but is 'absorbed into Parvati'. The song-book for *Kurukshetra* (1933) lists Duryodhana's wife as Bhanumati, and invents a cast of characters in the Kaurava camp. A more understandable confusion is its naming of Dharma as Yudhishtira's father, confusing Yudhishtira's connection to Dharma with his filial attachment to Pandu. In *Mahatma Vidur* (1943), Vidura's wife is Sunayana, a possible source for the name being the wife of Janaka, Mithila's King.

In Mythologicals based on *The Ramayana*, most filmmaker inventiveness was centered on the character of Hanuman, and this included cross-referencing to tales in which he typically plays no role. His rescue of Rama and Lakshmana was embroidered in several Mythologicals with the character of Chandrasena who takes on Duratandi's role in revealing Mahiravana's secret of invulnerability to death. *Hanuman Patal Vijaya* (1951) depicted Chandrasena as the wife of Ahiravana, brother to Mahi, where in myth these two are often the same being, Vrtra. Mahi vows to kill Rama and Lakshmana before the goddess Chandi, her name possibly suggested by Chandi's slaying of Mahishasura. A scene in which Hanuman battles his gate-keeper son is evocative of Shiva's fight with Ganesha, while Rama's promise to marry Chandrasena in his Krishna avatar could perhaps have been suggested by the name of one of Krishna's lovers, Chandravali. The climax of *Ram Hanuman Yuddha* (1957) is described in its song-book as 'the heart-rending battle between the Lord and His devotee'. The king, who provoked the battle by insulting the sage Vishvamitra, is named as Shakunta, another name for Vishvamitra or for his son, and seems to be an illustration of the surfacing of a detail that 'can hardly have been consciously present in the mind of the film director' but surfaces nonetheless (O'Flaherty, 1981: 28).

Innovations in Mythologicals were at times applauded by film critics. A reviewer of *Hanuman* (1948) was delighted by the depiction of Rama's desire to install a symbol of Shiva before going into exile; 'Ram asks Hanuman to invite Ravan from Lanka and Acharya Ravan actually comes and performs the ceremony ... the most learned Brahmin of his times, a peerless scientist, a commentator on the "Vedas", a scholar of unequalled merit and a staunch devotee of Shiva' ('Ranjit shows monkey tricks'). However, more typical in its reaction is a review of *Shravan Kumar* (1946), which found the film to be 'the product of someone's fertile imagination' ("Shravan Kumar" is a veritable headache. Stupid story, bad direction and insipid performance combine to make a hopeless mess!'). One complaint

against *Ram Vivah* (1949) was that Banasura arrived at Sita's wedding 'quite a few centuries before his time' ("Ram Vivah" is just old junk!). *Usha Haran* (1949) was damned for 'the fertile but putrid imagination of our film producers'. ("Usha Haran" becomes another flop! Idiomatic junk insults Hindu gods!')

However, the energetic condemnation of innovation was matched by the boredom inspired by repetition on the screen, familiarity breeding contempt. A reviewer of *Subhadra* (1946) claimed that 'no one is interested in mythological subjects these days' ("Subhadra" imposing presentation of barren theme!'). Another reviewer, of *Shankar Sita Anasuya* (1965), found the Mythological to be 'crowded', and Sita's story to have been told so often that her every movement was predictable ('Mixture of myths'). Vijay Bhatt's *Ramrajya* (1967), a color remake of his successful 1943 film of the same name, failed to please reviewers. The music was 'not very outstanding', the lyrics 'equally uninspiring', and the actors portrayed none of the earlier version's 'credible nobility...serene dignity...supreme command of the self, that quiet but vibrant authority of Valmiki's immortal hero' ('Verdict').

While audiences approved the occasional embroidering of a tale, they appear to have preferred the comfort of a well-known story over which embellishment did not dominate. This, in part, explains the popularity of the serialized television epics of Sagar (*Ramayan*, 1987) and Chopra (*Mahabharat*, 1989), with their recognizable plots and identifiable characters. These producers reveal a marked preference for stereotypical characters who are wholly good or thoroughly wicked, and who have had any ambiguity excised, telescoped as they already are by the small screen. Sagar, for example, overcame the difficulty of Rama spurning Sita, by her own insistence that she be exiled. So too, any suggestion of Dasharatha's lust for Kaikeyi was removed. Kaikeyi's own repentance was a reprieve of character that was about as far as television ventured in character manipulation. Both these epic-based series deployed popularly entrenched details, such as *Ramayan's* inclusion of Hanuman consuming the sun, thereby robbing the world of light, rather than his sun-related activities depriving the world of wind. However, they did not attempt anything like earlier large screen modifications of well-loved tales, with the associated rendering of characters as either incognito or altogether vanquished.

Transplanted bodies

Audiences have always been comfortable with invented screen legends, with plots reminiscent of those found in myth and epic, such as that of the costume genre film *Prapancha Pash* (1929), which involved two rival kings, a kingdom lost and a beloved enslaved through a crooked game of dice, and an eventual thwarting of evil. (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1994: 233). The song-book for the costume drama *Apsara* (1961), includes circuitous references to mythology. The heroine of the story, Chandraprabha, marries Yuvraj whom everyone believes dead once the apsaras Mohini abducts him. Chandraprabha is allowed one visit to heaven. Pregnant and exiled, she suffers until her husband's return. Chandraprabha was the name of the daughter of a secret marriage, who was herself secretly married to a Yadava hero and later recognized as a legitimate wife. Such a tale, although from myth, was produced as a costume drama due to the fact that it lacked a Hindu god or epic hero, an attribute that, by the '60s, increasingly defined the Mythological genre.

The Mythological inheritance of sections of many Hindi films is stark, as in the social genre film *Mother India* (Khan, 1957). The film incorporates the suggestion of a multitude of Mythological characters and themes, including the increasingly dominant one of suffering. The arms of the heroine Radha's husband are crushed under a rock. She sells her jewelry to replace dead bullocks, their replacements seized by a moneylender. Her husband leaves her, her mother-in-law dies, she gives birth to her fourth child, the grandmother dies, the third child is drowned, the house is destroyed, the crops so close to harvest are wiped out by flood, and the baby dies. Like Hollywood's *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), this melodramatic overkill was divided by an 'entr'acte/intermission', separating the different forms of suffering endured by the heroine. *Mother India* is an example of a successful film evoking a great number of Hindu, as well as non-Hindu mythic images, one Christian image involving Radha ploughing the soil in the attitude of Christ carrying the cross. The first scene in the film is of Radha's Hindu marriage ceremony, and a cast of Hindu mythic characters has been suggested to the minds of critics. Radha evokes Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Mother Earth, Savitri, Sita, Surabai, and because her husband's name is Shyamu, Radha (Thomas, 1989: 17). However, she most clearly calls to mind the figure of Draupadi, as in the scene in which a moneylender threatens to violate her. She maintains her purity while dressed in filthy rags after an appeal to Lakshmi, in the same manner that the incarnation of Vishnu's Shri, menstruating and threatened, called on Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu. Krishna is associated with Shiva in the film, and the lyrics, 'Oh robber of hearts, spring

festival is here; play the tune on your flute’, are sung before statuary of Shiva and Nandi, in this epic-scale khichri infused with elements readily found in the Hindu landscape. By the ‘60s, film references to myth had developed filmic contexts of their own. If a character harks back to the character of *Mother India’s* Radha, then the mythic associations suggested in Radha’s portrayal are incorporated. Film appropriates the original mythic reference to the degree that it adds another layer or version to the image and, doing what myth does, adds a variant.

Repercussions of the rewriting of myth and epic in Mythologicals and in other film genres, which haphazardly appropriated mythic plots and characters, were felt in another predominantly mythological media, the children’s picture book series, *Amar Chitra Katha*. Throughout the years, this publication has given quite standard mythic and epic versions of the relationships between characters and of the unfolding of events. Possibly due to the relatively recent availability of old films, *Amar Chitra Katha* has shown tendencies toward re-invention since about 2005. For example, *Amar Chitra Katha’s* conflicting depictions of Krishna as both polygamous and monogamous reveal an ambivalence towards Krishna’s sexuality. The back-cover of *Krishna and Rukmini* (July 2005) states, ‘Krishna is often known as the great lover in Indian mythology. Yet information of the women he had wooed won and wed are surprisingly limited and is confined to his conquest of Rukmini’. However, in the following month’s issue *The Symantaka Gem*, Krishna, who already has an unnamed wife when he weds Jambavati and then Satyabhama, is shown ‘to relax in the company of his many wives’, pictorially surrounded by eleven women (August 2005: 31). Mythic bodies abound, but are difficult to explain.

Concluding Remarks

Through formulaic embodiments of mythic and epic characters, in combination with themes from myth and epic, the Mythological genre contributed to the development of a distinctive Indian film style in which exist recognizable touchstones that allow the audience to instantly comprehend a character or a situation. In the heyday of the Mythological, when a plot would address similar thematic concerns to that of other Mythologicals, production was safe and repetitive; like the gods themselves, their acts repeated throughout cosmic time.

By the late ‘60s, Mythologicals no longer attracted huge audiences, not only because they were perceived to be antique and populated by people from long ago. While the

audience was content to consume large volumes of background, ersatz mythic material in recognition of film's inherent artificiality, Mythological filmmakers became unacceptably creative in the way that they recycled themes and characters. As the genre evolved, the constraints of providing an acceptable fare of well-known mythic and epic adventures in a straightforward manner, gave way to tales of unknown characters, and pressed favorite characters into service to enhance stories that were latter day fabrications. These types of narrative constructions are, like the extraneous material in non-Mythological genres, the result of an easygoing approach to the wider framing material in combination with a powerful film creativity, part of an interpretive license of long tradition reaching back to the *puranas*. However, what for decades had seemed so real on the silver screen became what it always had been, a flickering shadow of reality, as belief could no longer be suspended so impoverished had the genre become, in budget, plot and *dramatis personae*. No new stories from epic or myth were explored. Instead, new fictional material was provided, eventually outweighing in number remakes of earlier stories.

The enthusiastic response to the reincarnation of gods and heroes on television makes it clear that there is still a screen audience for the epics, while the reissue of Mythologicals on DVD satisfies a repeat viewing demand of an audience that is nostalgic for the flamboyant Mythologicals of the past. It is apposite that in India, a culture with a strong attachment to, and engagement with, its epic and mythic traditions, the Mythological should once have been bigger than *Ben Hur*. Angels and demons in western imagination have been largely replaced by aliens and vampires, visibly embodied in western screen product. The primeval, ambivalent sense of being both of, and not of, the world, instills a need for non-human connections. In India, early Mythological films provided an entertaining new way to satisfy this craving. With the rebirth of the genre on the small screen, cleansed of the often-complex ambivalence of behavior and physicality of epic and mythic characters, reduced as they are to true two-dimensionality, Mythological beings have experienced a miraculous resurrection.

WORKS CITED

Reviews, advertisements, stills

ANON. (1933). 'An impression of "Seeta"', *Varieties Weekly*, vol. 4 (6), Nov. 11: 7-8.

- ANON. (1938). “Dhruva Kumar”, *Filmindia*, vol. 36, June.
- ANON. (1943). “Ramrajya” draws huge crowds at the super: Prem Adib slanders an immortal role’ review, *Filmindia*: 67-71, Nov.
- ANON. (1945). “Krishnarjun Yuddha” presents a dancer story: boring story, bad direction, rotten music’, *Filmindia*, vol 51, N^o3, Sept.
- ANON. (1945). “Taramati” fails to move! Beautiful sets don’t help the story!’, *Filmindia*, vol. 68-9, Nov.
- ANON. (1946). “Kurukshetra” provides splitting headache! A disgustingly stupid film concoction! Shamli makes a good impression!’, *Filmindia*, vol. 53-55, Aug.
- ANON. (1946). “Rukmini Swayamwar” proves intensely boring. An all round rotten picture’, *Filmindia*, vol. 66-7, June.
- ANON. (1946). “Subhadra” imposing presentation of barren theme! Shanta Apte gives excellent performance’, *Filmindia*, vol. 57-9, Sept.
- ANON. (1948). ‘Ranjit shows monkey tricks on the screen. “Jai Hanuman” becomes popular draw!’, *Filmindia*, vol. 61-3, Nov.
- ANON. (1948). “Shravan Kumar” is a veritable headache. Stupid story, bad direction and insipid performance combine to make a hopeless mess!’, *Filmindia*, vol. 55-6, Aug.
- ANON. (1949). “Usha Haran” becomes another flop! Idiotic junk insults Hindu gods!’, *Filmindia*, vol. 49, June.
- ANON. (1950). “Ram Vivah” is just old junk! Picture fails to appeal!’, *Filmindia*, vol. 61, Jan.
- ANON. (1950). ‘Superb mythological musicals for the season: “Murliwala” and “Bhola Shankar”’, *Filmindia*, vol. 59, Nov.
- ANON. (1952). “Vishwamitra”: a prodigy of the creative talent of master director of India’, *Filmindia*, vol. 66, June.
- ANON. (1954). ‘Music redeeming feature of “Tilottama”’, *Filmfare*, vol. 19, Aug. 20.
- ANON. (1954). “Radha Krishna”: a maid’s undying devotion’, *Filmfare*, vol. 22-3, May 14.
- ANON. (1956). “Ayodhyapati” becomes a mild mythological: picture fails to thrill picturegoers’, *Filmindia*, vol. 61-2, Dec.
- ANON. (1959). “Gaj Gauri” a fairly well-made mythological: modest but sincere portrayal of a “Mahabharat” tale’, *Filmindia*, vol. 64-5, Jan.
- ANON. (1963). “Sairandhri”’, *Filmfare*, vol. 37, March 8.

ANON. (1965). 'Mixture of myths in "Shankar, Sita, Anasuya"', *Screen*, vol. 12, Dec. 10.

ANON. (1968). 'Verdict', *Star and Style*, Jan.: 33.

ANON. (1989). "Shyam Sunder", *Sakal*, vol. 398, Feb. 2.

Song-books

Apsara (1961). Chitraleyra.

Bharat Milap (1965). Sharad.

Devi Devayani (1931). Ranjit.

Gopal Krishna (1938). Prabhat.

Hanuman Patal Vijaya (1951). Basant.

Krishnavatar (1932). Krishnatone.

Krishnavatar (1964). Kashi.

Kurukshetra (1933). Chhatrapati.

Laksmi Narayan (1951). Basant.

Mahasati Tulasi Vrinda (1947). Jayant Desai.

Mahatma Vidur (1943). Circo.

Manthan/Justice of Vikram (1941). Wadia.

Muraliwala (1927). Maharashtra.

Murliwala/Muraliwala (1951). Madhuwani.

Nand Kishore (1951). M and T Films.

Pandava Nirvan (1930). General.

Radha Krishna (1933). Asian Film.

Radha Krishna (1954). G. P. Prod.

Ram Hanuman Yuddha (1957). Ravikala.

Sakshi Gopal (1957). Ratnadeep.

Shree Krishna Bhakti (1955). Combine.

Veer Babruvahan (1934). Ranjit.

Veer Babruvahan (1950). Basant.

Screen

D.G. Phalke Films. (NFAI compilation) *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) [10 min]; *Lanka Dahan* (1917) [9]; *How Films are Made* (1917) [10]; *Shree Krishna Janma* (1918) [6]; *Kaliya Mardan* (1919) [45]; *Tukaram* (1921) [15]; *Bhakta Prahlad* (1926) [15].

Durga Pooja (1954). Dhirubhai B. Desai, director.

Gone with the Wind (1939). Victor Fleming, director.

Gopal Krishna (1938). V.G. Damle and S. Fattelal, directors.

Lakshmi Narayan (1951). Nanabhai Bhatt, director.

Mahabharat (1989). B.R. Chopra, director, 94 episodes.

Mother India (1957). Mehboob Khan, director.

Ramayan (1987). Ramanand Sagar, director, 78 episodes.

Ramrajya (1943). Vijay Bhatt, director.

Sampoorna Ramayan (1961). Homi Wadia, director.

Shree Ganesh (1962). S.S. Dharwadkar, director.

Shree Ganesh Mahima/Shree Krishna Vivah (1950). Homi Wadia, director.

Vaman Avtar (1955). Raman Desai, director.

Text

CHRISTIE, ELIZABETH (1979). "Indian Philosophers on Poetic Imagination (Pratibha)", *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 7 (2) June: 153-207. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00164545>

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA (1998). *Indian Cinema: A Visual Voyage*, New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

GROWSE, F.S. (1876). "The prologue to the 'Ramayana' of Tulsi Das: A Specimen Translation", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 44 (1): 1-29.

GUPT, SOMNATH (2005). *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development*, Kathryn Hansen (translator & ed), Calcutta, Seagull.

INDIAN CINEMATOGRAPH COMMITTEE (1927-28). *Report: Volume 1*, Calcutta, Government of India.

LANG, KAREN (1995). "Shaven Heads and Loose Hair: Buddhist Attitudes towards Hair and Sexuality" in Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard & Wendy Doniger (eds). *Off with her Head: the Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture*, Berkley, University of California Press: 32-52.

MITTER, PARTHA (1994). *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: Occidental Orientations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

O'FLAHERTY, WENDY DONIGER (1981). "The Mythological in Disguise: An Analysis of *Karz*", *India International Centre Quarterly*, 8 (1) March: 23-9.

PAI, ANANET, ed. (2005). *Amar Chitra Katha*, Bombay, India Book House: July, Aug.

PHALKE, D.G. (February 1918). "'Navyug' newspaper article", in Jagat Murari, (ed. 1979). *Studies in Film History: A Compilation of Research Papers Devoted to D.G. Phalke (1877-1944)*, Pune, Film & Television Institute of India.

RAJADHYAKSHA, ASHISH and PAUL WILLEMEN (1994). *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315062549>

RANGOONWALLAH, FIROZE (1979). *A Pictorial History of Indian Cinema*, London, Hamlyn.

THOMAS, ROSIE (1989-1990). "Sanctity and Scandal: the Mythologization of 'Mother India'", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 2 (3): 11-30.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208909361312>

VATVE, BAPU (1993). *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, Pune, self-published.

LINDA ANNE HEMPHILL's publications include *The Bollywood Mythological*, Köln, Lambert Acad. Publ., 2009, that explored the powerful interaction between myth and popular culture in early Bombay cinema; *Australian Poems*, Lambert, 2010; and numerous articles and reviews concerning Indian film and history for *Asian Cinema*, *Indialogs* and *South Asia*.