

## Traditional Content and Narrative Structure in the Hindi Commercial Cinema

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(published in, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 54 (2), 1995. Pp. 169-190)

The commercial films of the Indian sub-continent have had an 80 year career as one of the dominant and most distinctive features of Indian popular culture. The film industry in India is among one of the world's largest, with a combined national output of between 700 and 800 Indian films annually. Films in as many as 15 different languages are produced in a variety of regional centers including Madras, Bombay, Hyderabad, and Calcutta. Films in Hindi, the most widely understood language in the sub-continent, represent the largest percentage of the annual national output; to the extent that there is a pan-Indian film style, that style may be said to be largely defined by the commercial Hindi film.

Hindi films and film stars are famous throughout India and much of south-eastern and western Asia. Mass culture in parts of Europe and Africa has also been influenced by Hindi films and film-music. The Hindi cinema is, further, one of the oldest non-Euro-American cinematic traditions in the world: The first Indian-produced feature film, *Rajah Harishchandra* [King Harishchandra], was released in 1913<sup>1</sup>. Indian sound films began four years after the premiere of the world's first sound film in 1927 (the American release, *The Jazz Singer*). Although many of the points made here will have relevance for other regional genres, this study is concerned exclusively with the traditional content of commercial Hindi sound films.

From their inception, Hindi sound films have consistently displayed a distinctly formulaic quality. In his discussion of Hindi cinema's value as fantasy, Sudhir Kakar has noted this feature of the genre, and it's consequent similarity to other traditional narratives:

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 based 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 (1983, 53-54) blames extensive government controls “which 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” for many of the industry’s difficulties, including this perceived lack of creativity. The censorship mentioned by Dayal is second only to sometimes crippling tax-rates in drawing industry criticism of government policy. Former Indian Chief Justice and Chairman of an Enquiry Committee on Film Censorship, G. D. Khosla, 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 a troubling frequency of rape scenes, kissing has remained, until very recently, a rarity in Hindi cinema.

One result of these difficulties is that the commercial Hindi film has often been classed among the worst escapist excesses of post-colonial capitalism. This is a common reaction from western viewers and not an uncommon response from Indians. 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 characterize the commercial Hindi output as “over-inflated and often formula-ridden,” shallow commodities created for an uneducated mass audience (Armes 1987, 121). Much criticism of the Hindi cinema is supported by neo-Marxist interpretations of mass culture. Manuel (1993, 47) summarizes much recent criticism; stating 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.” There are features of this style that justify negative reactions. Predictable romances and market-driven action-features make Hindi films remarkably easy to dismiss. Limited internal or external competition and consistent industry squabbling over territories, prices, taxes, and regulations all create a picture of capitalism at its chaotic and bullying worst.

Hindi films, however, are more than simply western-influenced products of market manipulation. Like their western counterparts, they represent a continuation their culture’s pre-cinema dramatic forms and stories, transformed by the capitalist economy of scale and the power of the mass media. Unlike 19th century Europe or America, however, there was no pan-Indian tradition of realistic theater in India from which a realistic cinematic tradition could have sprung. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the Bombay area there was the light-hearted music and dance oriented Parsi theater. Like the more rural Marathi *tamasha*, this style was based on skits, songs, jokes, and the attractions of a troupe’s female dancers, rather than on the presentation of a single narrative. At the turn of the century one also might encounter the more serious but equally musical Marathi *natya-sangit* or the traditional (and originally religious) Bengali music-drama, *jatra*. These both offered socially or politically relevant tales as well as melodrama.

For the majority of Hindi-speaking Indians, however, including those that make up the contemporary film audience, drama meant traditional styles such as the wide spread *nautanki*, the *manch* (literally, “stage”) of Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthani *khyal*, as well as similar regional folk-styles such as the Gujerati *bhavai*. All are performed by itinerant professional or semi-professional troupes, usually in outdoor settings; all emphasize music and dance. Many offer a series of shorter plays rather than a single long production. Swann (1990, 258) notes that *nautanki*, and related genres “gathered its material from many sources: the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Rajput stories, the *Puranas* and other Indian legends, Arabic and Persian tales, historical incidents and characters, movies, and fictional material based on contemporary life.” In this study I will propose that beneath the westernized gloss of the

commercial cinema, and despite its manipulative capitalist tendencies, there are direct connections between the Hindi cinema and the large body of epic stories that exist in oral and written versions throughout India. I suggest further, that these connections explain the continued popularity of Hindi films. To justify this assertion, I will consider the characters, story types, and plots of Hindi films with reference to a number of specific features found in traditional Indian epics in an attempt to discover functional similarities of content and narrative structure in these diverse traditions of Indian narrative entertainment.

In his description of the relationship between the classical version of the *Ramayana*, and a folk version of that epic from Kerala, Blackburn (1991, 112-113) has noted that “the folk tradition as a whole provides an interpretive framework for the classical epic text.” He notes that the regional variant enlarges upon and reinterprets the identity and meaning of the great pan-Indian epic. The intertextual connection between traditional epics and Hindi cinema does at times operate in a similar fashion. Most epic content, however, occupies the role of secondary or allusory sub-text, rather than primary text, in Hindi films. With the exception of the early mythological genres that overtly recounted epic stories, most Hindi film plots are not explicitly “about” Arjuna, Alha, or any other epic hero.

In addition to this basic transformation of meaning, there are a variety of frames, imposed by the conventions of commercial cinema and by the nature of popular culture. Both may interact with the original meaning of the epic content. The most obvious and distinctive cinematic frame is the beginning portion of the film itself. For most of the history of Hindi sound films, this meant a typical film-credits sequence over a static background, accompanied by instrumental music or by the film’s primary song. The initiation of the event with an acknowledgment of artifice may be seen as a continuation of traditional performance practice, as well as an imitation of English and American films.

The introductory sequences in many Hindi films display distinctive blends of western and Indian dramatic conventions. Almost all Indian narrative performances, folk or court, local or supra-regional, romantic or martial, begin with a *mangalacharan*, a preliminary religious ritual invocation (Blackburn 1991, 20). Many film makers frame their work with

similar invocatory performance markers. The conventional cinematic frame, represented by the opening credit sequence is, itself, framed by the *mangalacharan*. Many of Raj Kapoor's films, such as his landmark 1951 release, *Awara* [Vagabond], begin with a lone worshipper (Kapoor's father, Prithviraj Kapoor) seated before a Shiva *lingam*, while an unseen chorus chants "*Om namaha Shiva.*" Only after this cinematic *puja* does the film commence with the famous "RK" logo and subsequently, the film's credits.

While epic content is framed within cinematic conventions, it is important to note that traditional content can and frequently does enlarge and reinterpret the characters and plots of their commercial vehicles. In other words, the intertextual connection between traditional epics and the Hindi cinema operates in both directions. In the concluding scene of the 1993 release *Khal-Nayak* [Anti-Hero], the film hero, Ram, played by Jackie Shroff, is described by another character (played by Sanjay Dutt), as "he who is Ram [God] in reality." He then strikes a pose at "Ram's" feet that mirrors much of the popular iconography of Ram and his divine monkey servant Hanuman. The pose strengthens the allusion to "Ram in reality" and to the *Ramayana*, of which that Ram is the hero. Despite his pose, no one in or out of the film's text takes Dutt's assertion literally; it is clearly part of the cinematic artifice.

Nevertheless, the film's director relied on the audience's understanding of the intertextual relationship between the traditional/religious Ram of the *Ramayana* and the cinematic/popular hero Ram to enlarge upon their appreciation of the story and its characters. Simultaneously, however, the image of Ram, as God and as the hero of the *Ramayana*, is framed by film fans' knowledge of actor Shroff's public life as reported in the film magazines ("Sexy Shroff's Most Explosive Interview!" *Stardust*, July 1993) and by his previous cinematic roles, especially, in this case, Shroff's earlier character named "Ram" from the 1989 release, *Ram-Lakhan* [Ram and Lakhan], in which there were also allusions to the *Ramayana*.

The impact of these frames and transformations imposed upon traditional epic content by the commercial cinema, is balanced, if not outweighed by, the added meaning and appeal that traditional content and structure lend to the cinema. In the remainder of this article, I will describe a number of traditional epic features in Hindi films: story- and character-types, story

content, inter-personal relationships, and humorous reflexivity. I will attempt to enumerate the variety of bi-directional transformations that occur when these traditional features are incorporated into the cinematic medium.

### Traditional Indian Narrative and Epic

Performed narrative takes on an endless variety in contemporary India, from itinerant beggars who tell stories on street corners to well-established troupes performing popular theater genres. The broad format found in many oral epics of religious invocation followed by spoken or declaimed narrative alternating with sung commentary (e.g., Alha, Annanmar, or Pabuji) is equally common to Hindi films. Epic tales are transmitted in all possible formats and combinations of media, from written texts in classical Sanskrit, to oral traditions in many regional languages, and recently, to televised narratives in a carefully Sanskrit-ized 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 story that became part of the secular *nautanki* theater repertoire during the 19th century; in 1912 it provided the plot for the first Indian-produced and directed film. Iqbal Masud reports that in 1987 the story was still performed in some regions as a folk drama, under the title *Satyaharishchandrayamu* (Masud 1987, 12)<sup>2</sup>.

Like traditional epics of all types, Hindi films are highly emotional narratives. And, again like most Indian narrative traditions, Hindi films portray a wide variety of emotions in sometimes rapid (and for western audiences bewildering or inconsequent) succession. The 1958 release *Amardeep* [Eternal Flame] will serve to exemplify this traditional feature of most Hindi films. The film's title refers to the story's conclusion in which the hero's secondary paramour (having just been revealed to be the heroine's sister) is killed by the film's villain. As the survivors stand sadly over her body, a flame (representing her soul) glows and gradually rises to hover above the heads of the hero and heroine. This is the eternal flame that will protect the surviving couple throughout their life together.

This somber ending is a common enough plot convention (although not usually with the special effects), but the variety of emotion and the rapidity of emotional change throughout the film reflect the traditional importance of emotional diversity. Out of the narrative's 251 minute length, the four longest scenes are ten and eleven minutes in duration. Two of these long scenes (each of which represents roughly seven percent of the total film) are dominated by the emotion (*bhava*, in terms of Indian aesthetic theory) laughter (*hāsa*), but the first 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 (*shoka*); the last (the film's final eleven minutes) is fragmented into anger, wonder, fear, love, and sorrow! In the remainder of the film, the emotions succeed each other in scenes whose durations range from one minute to nine minutes, but whose average duration is four and one-half minutes.

Richmond has compared the Indian theory of emotional content in the 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 melange found in films like *Amardeep* can thus be seen as derived from this broad theory of dramatic aesthetics India based on *rasa*, or abstract emotional types, and *bhava*, the actual emotions and the stereotyped actions that convey them. While sudden shifts of *bhava*, (from laughter [*hāsa*] to sorrow [*shoka*], or from love [*rati*] to disgust [*jugupsa*], for example) are often viewed negatively by western critics of Hindi films, they are appreciated by Indian audiences as providing the emotional diversity found in traditional Indian narrative.<sup>3</sup>

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 religious allegories on the other, depending on the nature of the context, narrator, and audience. Even narratives that are explicitly profane, non-ritual drama, are remarkable not for their avoidance of religious content, but for their use of that content within a secular plot structure and performance context. The Hindi cinema began its career presenting stories that were explicitly or implicitly religious, and the "mythological," in which tales of the Gods were

recounted, is an historically significant sub-genre. Modern commercial releases in Hindi often strain the censorship regulations, and yet miracles abound in their stories; the intervention of the Gods, or in some cases Allah, *deus ex machina* is not infrequent (e.g., *Allah Rakha* [He whom God preserves], 1986). In the 1988 “comeback” vehicle of actor Amitabh Bachchan, *Ganga, Jamna, Saraswati* [Ganga, Jamana, and Saraswati], Bachchan’s hero is rescued consistently by the god Shiva, through the offices of a supernatural cobra, an animal closely associated with this powerful deity. 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 film’s villain.

#### Epic Story-Types and Characters

Blackburn and Flueckiger (1989, 4) have noted that Indian epic stories may be broadly described as martial, sacrificial, or romantic and that different genres may often be linked to distinctive types of performance contexts. Martial, sacrificial, and romantic epics all have characteristics that are clearly reflected in the cinema. Martial stories focus on male heroes, power and social obligations, group solidarity, and revenge obtained through physical and political conflict. Films with martial stories are common in Hindi cinema. During the mid-70s and 80s 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 Manmohan Desai film of 1985, *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. As a lone hero, his primary associates include his horse and his dog; any additional assistance is received from the Gods. Bachchan’s character also displays a favorite dramatic device especially common in stories of the *nautanki* theater. The film’s opening establishes his identity as the son of an Indian prince, who stands steadfast in his opposition to the British. Although the hero does not learn of his status until the end of the film, when he defeats the British villains and their Indian collaborators, the audience’s knowledge of his true identity sheds a certain glamour on



his character 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 on 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 super-human endurance and perseverance. In discussing the heroic role in Indian epics, Beck 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" (Beck 1989, 168). Thus, the sacrificing and persevering in sacrificial tales and films are usually and conventionally undertaken by female characters: wronged wives, separated sweethearts, mothers, or sometimes courtesans with the proverbial heart of gold. Lahiri (1983, 36) notes that 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. The famous actress Nargis Dutt portrayed what is perhaps the ultimate politically correct sacrificial heroine in the 1957 release, *Mother India* (itself a remake of the 1940 *Aurat* [Woman])<sup>4</sup>. Persevering against corrupt money-lenders, abandonment, betrayal, monsoons, isolation, and death, she provides the inspiration for her son's and village's survival. Regarding Dutt's character (Radha) in this film, Gandhi and Thomas (1991, 118) have noted, "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."

*Sauten ki beti* [Co-wife's Daughter] (1983), 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. *Avataar* [Incarnation] (1983) is an exception to the generality of female sacrifice, although the film's title offers a potential explanation for this particular hero's stoicism. As an *avatar*, an incarnation of a god, Rajesh Khanna, when confronted by

the reprehensible and completely unfamiliar behavior of his children, naturally displays more patience and understanding than might a martial hero (Bachchan's martial heroes, of course, are renowned for their impulsive-ness).

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. Rajendra Kumar's protagonist first sacrifices his love for his traditional concepts 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, the best friend, also in the name of tradition.) Kumar's protagonist 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 almost all films have a romantic element, films or epics of the specifically romantic story-type espouse goals such as personal freedom, and the quest for love. These goals often explicitly challenge social norms or perceived divisions in Indian society (e.g., *Bharosa* [Trust], 1940; *Piya Milan* [Union of Lovers], 1985); sometimes, however, 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 *Asli Nakli* [Genuine and False] (1962), 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 disapproval and threats of disinheritance. At the film's conclusion, however, the father relents and our hero is restored to his wealthy surroundings. In this romance, then, the narrative rewards behavior that challenges the social norm of class division.

While romantic heroes and heroines consistently engage in socially challenging behavior, they are not necessarily rewarded for that behavior. The date of a film's creation, the nature of the social defiance, together with extenuating circumstances within the plot all affect the outcome of that defiance. In fact, the epic classification, romance, may actually

have two sub-categories in the Hindi cinema, successful and tragic, depending upon whether or not the hero and heroine are happily united by the film's end. In successful romances, such as *Ashiqi* [Lover] (1990), the quest for personal freedom and love are fulfilled.

Two films that challenge the traditional Hindu proscription against widow remarriage illustrate the frequently ambivalent attitude of the romantic challenge. In the 1988 release, *Ishwar* [Ishwar (God)], the film's protagonist (Ishwar), marries the widow-heroine. Ishwar, however, is mentally retarded and thus operates happily outside of, or perhaps unaware of, normal social rules. In Raj Kapoor's *Prem Rog* [The Disease of Love] (1982), the director carefully depicts the heroine's first wedding night so that the audience understands that this first marriage was never consummated. In a cinematically acceptable subterfuge, the heroine remains pure for the film's hero, her second husband. Even though the hero and society believe otherwise, the viewers know that Kapoor's actual message is one of protest under socially acceptable situations.

In their introductory 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" (Blackburn and Flueckiger 1989, 5). In tragic film romances, however, where the romantic tendency to challenge established norms is combined with the conventions of sacrificial plots that uphold those norms, the ultimate fate of the hero and/or heroine may well be socially significant. In such films, one or both of the young lovers are sacrificed for the sake of the norms that have been questioned. The 1936 *Achhut Kanya* [Untouchable Girl] is an early film in which an untouchable heroine and a Brahmin hero fall in love, thus challenging strict and powerful traditions of endogamous marriage based on caste. Hero and heroine both ultimately marry into their own castes, betraying the cinematic portrayal of romantic love for the sake of social norms. The film concludes its apparent challenge of caste law by sacrificing the heroine, who is killed trying to save her husband and her beloved. In Hindi films, death (as in *Ratan* [Jewel], 1944), monastic life (as in *Saraswati Chandra* [Saraswati Chandra], 1968), or exile are the only traditionally acceptable fates for the protagonists of tragic romances. The

death of hero and/or heroine concludes films such as *Mela* [Fair] (1948) or *Do Badan* [Two Bodies] (1966), in which the heroines are married by arrangement to the “wrong” man (i.e., not the film’s hero). The tremendously popular *Qayaamat se Qayaamat tak* [Now and Forever]<sup>5</sup> (1988) is a recent example in which a socially unacceptable marriage is actually consummated. The challenge to inter-family enmity is more than the young lovers can overcome, however: both are dead by the end of the film.

Iqbal Masud has noted the resonance of tragic film romances with the story of the tragic lovers, Laila and Majnu. Widely known throughout south and central Asia, the story itself has been the subject of five Hindi films: *Laila-Majnu* [Laila and Majnu], 1931, 1931, 1945, 1953, 1976), and has provided the thematic material for many more. Like the Hindu Radha-Krishna stories, there is a connection between romantic and divine love: “earthly love is a preparation for the heavenly . . . the essential desire of [for] God” (Masud 1987, 21). “Laila/Radhas” appear frequently in Hindi films as romantic and/or tragic heroines. The heroine of *Qayaamat se Qayaamat tak* personifies the cinematic ideal of Laila/Radha, a beautiful young woman whose longing for union with her beloved compels her to risk all.

The Muslim *Laila-Majnu*, is an overtly tragic tale, whose religious overtones are less explicit than those of its Hindu counterpart, the story of Radha and Krishna. In the latter, Kinsley notes that “many poems portray Radha as torn between seeking out Krishna and protecting her reputation as a married village woman. Her love for him totally possesses her but is extremely dangerous to reveal” (Kinsley 1986, 86). The consequences of such a dangerous (and extra-marital) love affair are implied in the *bhakti* literature that focuses on the longing (*viraha*) of Radha and the other *gopis* for Krishna. Within the conventions of film, however, and in order to portray social behavior that is acceptable to critics and censors, Hindi films normally insure that unchaste females (and sometimes males as well) are accounted for through death, abandonment, or a retreat into religious life. It may be that many tragic romances explicitly portray the socially acceptable resolution to the dilemma posed by Radha’s “dangerous” love affair with Krishna. 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

Two of the most widely known stories in South Asia are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Both are central scriptures of the Hindu religion and have been endlessly retold, in songs, stories, books, drama, films, and television. At the risk of extreme simplification, it may suffice to say that both are tales of intra-family conflict between brothers or other close relations. In the *Mahabharata* the inherent weaknesses of essentially good characters ultimately lead to civil war, while in the *Ramayana*, filial unity is central to overcoming an external threat. The two epics offer distinct views of familial relations; each involves the Indian concepts of *karma*, action and the results of action, and *dharma*, the following of one's destined path.

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* offer endless patterns that reappear in the Hindi cinema. Together with other pan-Indian tales, these epics 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 the 1989 release *Shandaar* [A Person of Dignity], Mithun Chakravarty plays a police officer, the elder of a pair of brothers. When he confronts his younger brother who is engaged in smuggling activities, he insists, "This is supposed to be the *Ramayana*, not the *Mahabharata*!" 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 India's two major epics. He suggests that the determined revenge-seeking model of Draupadi found in the *Mahabharata*, or the chaste, long-suffering example of Sita from the *Ramayana*, are the basic models for heroinely behavior in most Indian narratives. The "Sita model," of course, is found throughout epics and films of a sacrificial nature. "Draupadis" are naturally more common in martial epics: Dimple Kapadia, for example, in *Zakhmee Aurat* [Wronged

Woman], 1988; or Hema Malini in *Durga* [Durga/Goddess], 1984. The heroines of such female-centered martial films often are depicted either as divinely inspired by, or as actual (but temporary) manifestations of the militant female goddesses, such as Durga or Kali (e.g., *Khoon Bhari Mang* [Bloody Marriage], 1988).

### Socio-Personal Relationships

Beck (1989) describes the importance of triangular character relationships in Indian epics; she suggests that these explain the central emotional conflicts that protagonists seek to resolve in the course of the narrative. Although the *Ramayana* involves a total of four brothers, it also offers a prototypical example of the triadic character relationship, fundamentally composed of a central hero (Ram), secondary male (Laksman), and secondary female (Sita). 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 contrasting female who often provokes one or both of the males into action.

The major figures in the popular 1961 release *Gunga-Jamna* [Ganga and Jamana] present a typical triadic configuration, with typically cinematic variations. In this classic martial story, a family's suffering at the hands of the local *zamindar* [landlord] results in the deaths of both parents and the loss of their land. Ganga and Jamana are the two sons who revenge their parents' murders. In a typically folk treatment of the hero, Ganga is well meaning, impetuous, and muscular, but not very bright, a "folk Bhima" in Beck's analysis (1989, 166). His younger brother, Jamana, is patient and intelligent. The brothers' bipolar natures are expressed in their appearance and careers, Ganga is large and dark-skinned, dressed in the peasant costume suitable for a farmer and (later) a bandit. Jamana, on the other hand, is slender and fair. He dresses in shirt and trousers and later in his policeman's uniform. Although circumstances place them in direct opposition (bandit versus policeman) their brotherly relations continue. Ganga dies after finally killing the evil *zamindar*.

The third member of this film's core triad is Dhanu, Ganga's paramour, 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 are also widespread in Indian epics. In *Ganga-Jamna*, Jamana is himself the central figure of a secondary triad completed by his own paramour Kamala and the village school-master. What is especially important 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, Jamana's beloved, Kamala, is the sister of the *zamindar*, an educated, upper class woman. The school-master is the "elder male" of the story, assuming a fatherly quality and personifying the virtues of learning, religion, and patience. The film's outcome clearly values these qualities (as represented by Jamana) over Ganga's, but as in many such stories, it requires both qualities to achieve a suitable conclusion. 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 offered no means of thwarting this disastrous event.

In Yash Chopra's 1975 hit, *Deewar*, Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor portray a bad elder brother-good younger brother dyad. Like the father and son pair, Bhoja and Devnarayan in the Rajasthani epic *Devnarayan*, and like the filial dyad already described in *Ganga-Jamna*, Kapoor's gentlemanly, moral character exists in contrast to Bachchan's angry impetuosity. In an ending that reverses the conclusion of the Rajasthani epic, but replicates the essence of the 1961 film, Bachchan dies in his mother's arms, his criminal behaviour redeemed by his own death and by the vengeance he has wreaked on the villains for his father's death. As Beck (1989, 160) notes, "for heroes and heroines epic death involves a subtle transition rather than either a clear defeat or total victory."

In folk epics, the triangular pattern of character relations may often become extended over a wide range of characters and generations. In 1986, *Nagina* [Snake-Woman] offered a typical heroine-based triad with husband and mother-in-law in second and third positions.

The situation was extended forward into the second generation in a sequel film (*Nigahen* [Glances], 1989), in which the core triad featured the original heroine's daughter as the new heroine, with her fiancé and dead mother (and her supernatural power) in second and third positions (Figure 1). In a clever marketing ploy, the same actress (Sri Devi) starred as the heroine (mother and daughter) in both films. As might be expected from a traditional Indian epic heroine, the divinely powerful Rajini (and in the sequel, her daughter Nilam) acts as the protector of her home and husband.

Triadic relationships seem to be primarily heroic in Indian epics, villainous triangles are rare and usually less developed. Primary villains in Hindi films are frequently supported by accomplices that form villainous triangles, although there is invariably less interaction among these three characters than among members of heroic triads. A negative triangle naturally has the primary villain at its apex. Supporting villains fall into a number of categories; these include: the comic villain, a villain who early in the film's plot betrays the hero (or his father), a female villain or temptress (vamp), and the strong-arm villain. Villainous triads are rarely developed in film plots. The core villain is almost inevitably destroyed by the film's end. The ends of secondary 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 by the film's end, 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 *Ramayana*, Blackburn describes the humorous, ironic, and reflexive twists which 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 members of the audience who are exceptionally familiar with a particular genre's repertoire. Blackburn (1991, 118) notes that this type of reflexivity is



“especially common in the oral commentary.” A similar type of humorous reflexivity appears in the Hindi cinema, but it is unclear just how long the phenomenon has existed. V.A.K. Ranga Rao suggests that reflexive humor has always existed in the Hindi cinema (personal communication, 1994).

The earliest example of this tongue-in-cheek humor, of which I am aware, takes place in a song and dance sequence toward 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 such as *Awara* [Vagabond] (1951), and *Jaagte Raho* [Stay Awake] (1956). To reinforce this reference to the actor’s father (as father, actor, and film-maker) Rishi Kapoor sings “Maybe you think I’m a rustic, maybe you think I’m a joker.” The word at the end of this rhyming couplet, “joker,” refers to another of Raj Kapoor’s film’s, *Mera Naam Joker* [My Name is Joker] (1970), in which both Raj and Rishi Kapoor also 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 wide spread phenomenon in south and south-east Asia in which the tedium of a long bus trip is either relieved or compounded (depending on one’s perspective) by video versions of popular films. Thus, the audience watches the hero watching a film. In the subsequent fantasy song sequence, itself a convention in Hindi cinema, the hero and heroine enact a series of famous songs and characters 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* [Anti-Hero] 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 their flight, sings snatches of film songs in a pretense of drunkenness; the chosen songs reflect on her name (Ganga), Ram’s (the hero’s) name, her situation, earlier films, and even earlier films featuring Dixit and Shroff. One of her most complex choices is the song “*Ram teri Ganga maili hogai*” [Lord Ram, 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 plays on its own heroine's name (Ganga), on the name of the famous and holy river, and on the state of contemporary Indian politics. That film's heroine sings the song in the midst of the villains as does the Ganga of *Khal-Nayak*. What is more, the hero in *Khal-Nayak* is named Ram, making the song more cinematically appropriate than in the original film. References encompassed by the song thus include: the God (Ram) invoked by the original song, the 1985 film and its Ganga heroine, the current Ganga's predicament, and the name of her hero (Ram), already associated with Ram/God and with the *Ramayana*. Equally convoluted are the reflexive gestures of her next song choice, "*Tera nam liya, tujhe yadh kiya*" [I called your name, I invoked your memory]. While the text also reflects on Ganga's present situation, its source is the 1989 *Ram-Lakhan* in which Dixit plays one of the heroines and Shroff plays one of the heroes, again named Ram. The 1989 film's title invokes the name of the core fraternal dyad of the *Ramayana* epic (Ram and Lakshman [Lakhan]); the use of the song thus reflects on that invocation and on Shroff's continued association with the Ram figure. The use of "*Tera nam liya*" in this context also reflects on the artifice of the cinema because it contrasts the current situation in which Dixit sings the song to Shroff (Ram) with the original cinematic sequence in which Shroff (Ram) sang (or at least lip-synched) this song to a different actress. Exactly how long such reflexivity has been present in Hindi cinema remains unclear. The 1981 example above is the earliest instance I have noted, but is surely not the first. Such humor, however, does seem to have become more frequent over the last 15 years.

### Conclusion

When Hindi films first appeared in the early 20th century, an enormous variety of traditional dramatic genres were found throughout Indian cities and villages, in many different social, historical, and religious roles. That the Hindi film industry 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 absorbed many of the themes and textual conventions of traditional drama; these have been retained as a structural and thematic basis

for many of even the most contemporary Hindi films. With its epic and traditional predecessors, Hindi film shares a concern for emotional variety; it employs stereotyped characters, a limited repertoire of themes, and a consistent vocabulary of plot developments. As noted at the beginning of this article, these attributes have provoked much of the criticism to which the products of the Hindi cinema have been subjected. It seems, however, that these features may be among the most “Indian,” aspects of Hindi films. Ironically, it would seem that for many critics, one major failing of the Hindi commercial cinema is the ongoing incorporation of traditional, indigenous attributes into a modern, Euro-American mass medium.

From a different perspective, the live nature of traditional narrative performance often is set within a calendric performance cycle, and may serve an explicitly devotional or ritual function as well. These factors, together with the itinerant nature of many traditional troupes, may all have combined to lessen the negative impact of the formulaic features listed here, especially in comparison to the product and profit-oriented makers of Hindi films. 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 in a year by fifty or even five hundred individuals, a Hindi film is shown three or four times daily to thousands of otherwise unrelated viewers in theaters throughout north India.

The nature of mass-media marketing requires a constant supply of new product. Even if the plot, the theme, and the characters remain the same, the film itself must be new, offering new fashions, new faces, and new songs. Throughout their lives, Indian audiences of traditional drama may attend countless retellings of a traditional epic, such as the *Ramayana*; they go expecting not a new story and new characters, but with the knowledge that the tale’s familiar characters and themes will once again assert the vitality of their view of themselves and the world. In a similar manner, Indian film audiences view the same stories and characters in countless retellings. The cinematic package (the film’s title, setting, stars, plot details, songs, etc.) is different, but inside the package, the message is familiar and, perhaps, comforting in the increasingly stressful world of contemporary India. In spite or their role in a

cynical, capitalist industry, and in spite of the sometimes stultifying films that result from their application, the traditional content and narrative conventions of the Hindi cinema locate that cinema, at least partially, within an old and deeply rooted set of Indian cultural meanings and values.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> 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., Ram, Sita, etc.). The titles of epics and all other Hindi words are printed in italics with diacritics (e.g., *Mahabharata*, *mangalacharan*, 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, *Gunga-Jamna*, are referred to as Ganga and Jamana.

<sup>2</sup> 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 *Mahabharata*. Subsequent to its status as a *nautanki* story, folk drama, and feature film, it formed part of the 1990 mythological, *Vishvamitra*, which was broadcast serially on Indian television.

<sup>3</sup> I 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, also to Lutgendorf for pointing out this correlation.

<sup>4</sup> I wish to express my thanks to V.A.K. Ranga Rao of Madras for sharing with me his knowledge of the finer points of Hindi film history.

<sup>5</sup> This title literally means "From the Day of Judgement (*qayamat*) to the Day of Judgement." I have translated this title and that of *Khooon Bhari Mang* [literally, The Part in a Woman's Hair Filled with Blood] below, according to my perception of their implied meanings.