

Shakti—The Power of the Mother

The Violent Nurturer in Indian Mythology and Commercial Cinema

By Jawahara K. Saidullah

L'article établit un lien entre les religions anciennes et les images cinématographiques modernes de l'éducateur violent. La femme traditionnelle hindoue est le symbole de l'énergie et de la puissance à l'état pur, « Shakti » qui détruit les mauvais esprits pour protéger ses proches et les éduque par le biais de ses actes de violence. Cette femme physiquement forte est réapparue dans les films commerciaux en Inde remplaçant ainsi l'héroïne passive, animée d'un esprit de sacrifice. La nouvelle femme fait ce que peut faire tout héros mâle, sinon mieux. On l'appelle souvent la déesse « Kali » qui venge toute injustice contre sa personne, sa famille et sa collectivité.

I grew up in India, amidst giant cinema posters and street corners blaring popular film music. In the morning, the temple bells clang and the pundits chant, as they worship the statues of the female goddess mother: the destroyer and rejuvenator of the universe. Even as devotees throng to the temples to worship the mother, cinema addicts queue up to box offices to watch celluloid dreams unfold. This marriage of religion and film is a palpable reality in India. Mythology and religion form strong thematic bases for Indian films. Even when the films are not mythological as such, religious imagery often appears in them. It is particularly interesting that the images of women portrayed in religious texts are transferred to the cinema screen. Women are worshipped as powerful goddesses carved in stone while they are stereotyped as silent and self-sacrificing. Then a new woman invaded the Indian screen. But was it a new image or a reinterpretation of the old? The violent nurturer, the mother goddess of the Indian screen is interesting, cathartic, and offers a sharp contrast to her predecessor.



Commercial Indian cinema

Indian films descended from folk theatre, travelling troupes performing religious and mythological plays in villages and towns. Naturalism in acting and staging was impossible. The voice had to be raised to be heard, the gesture grand to be seen. This style was transferred directly to film, where it was modified only marginally. Religious and mythological melodrama formed cinematic themes. The most striking contribution of folk theatre was in the frequent interpolation of songs and dances in Indian films. (Das Gupta, 1989) On July 7, 1896, a *Times of India* advertisement invited Bombay residents to witness “the marvel of the century, the wonder of the world.” This was the first film show in India: the cinematography of the Lumiere brothers of France. Attracted to the revolutionary potential of this mass

medium, D.G. Phalke released the first Indian feature film, *Rajah Harishchandra*, in 1913. (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy) In 1931, *Alam Ara*, the first film with sound made by A.M. Irani, was released. Both these films used mythological melodrama to become popular.

India's commercial cinema developed under British colonialism, the only national cinema to do so. It emerged in its classic form as the “all talking, all singing, all dancing Bombay talkie.” Cinema is one of India's ten largest industries. About two films are made every day. (Binford) Nine hundred odd films are produced annually by this prolific industry. I refer specifically to “commercial” cinema as distinct from the “realistic” cinema which is often referred to as parallel, art, and new cinema. Art filmmakers are linked by their rejection of commercial cinema values, themes, and stylistic approaches.

Audiences for commercial Indian cinema do not complain if the plots are too improbable or too fantastic. Perhaps that is what they pay for, a temporary escape into a fantasy world, far removed from reality. Economist Tariq Ali (Das Gupta and Hoberman) says that these "escapist extravaganzas" are reminiscent of the Hollywood musicals during the depression. The difference is that in India, there is an almost permanent depression, and thus an unending stream of such films is produced.

Das Gupta and Hoberman summarized the basic ingredients of a commercial Indian film: dances and songs, cabarets and car chases, rape and mother worship, fights and love scenes (inevitably played in the copious lap of nature), high pitched melodrama with outrageous finales. Thin story lines and sturdy actors connect all the dots. A typical advertisement for a commercial Indian film reads, "A glossy, spectacular human drama with tantalizing songs, nerve-splitting fights, superb suspense and heartbreaking subtle sentiments." (Binford)

Female representations

Mythology and religion have formed the themes both directly and insidiously for Indian films. Since religious and mythological themes have been transported to the silver screen, traditional female representations persist. The mother has been venerated in Hindu tradition. In 1928, Ghosha wrote that the essence of womanhood lies in motherhood. The traditional Indo-Aryan attitude is that of *Ma* or mother, even for her husband. "The idea of all encompassing motherhood as the highest principle was firmly accepted in Vedic times, transmitted to all other periods and has throughout all ages formed the basis of the exceptional degree of reverence paid to the mother." (Das)

Ancient Indian religion was strangely liberal in its treatment of women. Only later, as civilization developed, did the *Manusmriti* appear to crystallize the fate of Indian womanhood into subordination. Manu, the author of *Manusmriti* wrote down edicts of behaviour for all classes and types of people. He was largely responsible for the diminished social status of women. "Manu's code...has had the most negative effects, forging unbreak-

able shackles on Indian women for countless succeeding generations.... Manu for the first time legally assigned to woman her definite place in the scale of society." (Monier-Williams)

However, even Manu elevated the status of woman as mother. He wrote that a teacher "is ten times more venerable than a sub teacher, the father a hundred times more than the teacher, but the mother a thousand times more than the father." (Das) Needless to say, a woman who is not a mother is worthless, and the only way to gain societal status is to become a mother. The biological mother is nevertheless related to the great cosmic mother, the creator and rejuvenator of the universe, as we shall read later.

For decades, commercial Indian cinema has prescribed the roles of the ideal woman as the self-sacrificing, all-forgiv-

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ing martyr. The 'crying mother' and 'dewy eyed heroine' were common depictions (Das Gupta, 1985). The message for woman in Indian films is that the pinnacle of her ambition is marriage. If she has different desires, if she deviates from it, it is seen as a betrayal of her biological and functional role and she pays for it in humiliation and defeat. (Vasudeva and Langlet) Even if the heroine's husband mistreats her or has extra-marital affairs, it is her duty to forgive him, for he is her 'lord.' In films like *Pati Parmeshwar* (Husband is God, 1988), *Naseeb Apna Apna* (Different Destinies, 1986), and *Daasi* (Female Slave, 1981), the martyred traditional wife who wins her man from the 'bad', modern, ambitious woman is celebrated.

Rahman describes the traditional female characters in Indian films as either "the simple village girl who was content dancing around mustard fields with the poetry spouting hero," or the "devoted city woman who was willing to sacrifice everything for her beloved." For centuries, women had been told that their strength lay in their quiet servitude, their self sacrifice and their suffering. The image of a woman as a physically dominant being, violent and revengeful, was uncommon. For centuries, people worshipped the goddess Kali in all her awesome power, while Indian women stood on the fringes of society.

The violent nurturer: the mother goddess

India has recently generated a spate of woman-oriented films with a violent, almost bloodthirsty, avenging woman as the central focus. Hers is not a senseless violence: violence surfaces when her loved ones are threatened. She is a ferocious nurturer who does not let anyone harm those she loves. This woman is simply the reinterpretation of ancient goddess images of women. The mother goddess is perceived as the creator of the universe. She is the primal energy that created the universe. Baig quotes a famous tantric prayer, "Only when I am conjoined with thee, O Shakti, have I the power to be absolute Lord, otherwise God would not even be able to move...." Shakti means power, which is female energy in its purest form. The Hindus believed in the energy of the female. Shakti exists to give power to the male gods in the guise of their female consorts. However, her role is enabling, not merely supportive. (Robinson) The numerous female consorts are manifested in the preeminent goddess herself, "the Devi, as primary embodiment of shakti." Ancient pre-Aryans (2,000 B.C. and before) also worshipped a female goddess. That is, "Life came from food. Food came from soil, man came from woman, woman gave life. It is not astonishing that God was a woman." (Baig)

All the independent, lower goddesses are fused into her persona. In her most violent form, she is Kali—the demon slayer, who rides a tiger, has eight arms, wears a necklace of skulls, and holds aloft

the bloodied head of a slain demon. In her benevolent form, the goddess is Parvati, Uma, and Sati. When she becomes a destroyer and summons all her powers and the violent forces of nature, she is referred to by many names. Some of these are Durga, Bhavani, Bhairavi, Amba, Jagdamba, and Chandi Mahatmya (Spratt). Whichever form she takes she is pure Shakti (power).

Spratt describes the violent mother goddess further. She fights evil on behalf of the gods. She uses many weapons, including her teeth, while blood flows unceasingly. "She is alternately hideous and beautiful, and alternately terrifying and loving." She is again described as having a "hideous face, staring eyes, protruding teeth and bloodstains, skulls, corpses, snakes, etc." Her worshippers offer blood sacrifices. However, even in this form, she is loved. For her devotees, the message is clear: she kills and destroys to protect them and to usher in a new and better world era. She is their mother who wants only good for her children and who is enraged when they are threatened.

Kali is not just a violent destroyer, she is called *Kali Ma* (Kali the mother). She is the slayer of demons and her role is to restore the social order. For her worshippers, her children, she is merciful and bountiful—a mother. She reserves her terrifying wrath for the powers of evil. Despite similarities with her husband, Shiva, it is interesting that she is revered as mother, but he is not addressed as father. Another anomaly is that when Shiva performs the dance of death, *tandavnritya*, the world comes to an end and is totally destroyed. Kali, however does not destroy the whole world; only evil is destroyed. Kali is a rejuvenating force, while Shiva is purely destructive.

Some movies of the mid to late 80s have been based on the Kali aspect of woman. Film director, Malhotra, notes that "people, including women, don't want soft characters; they don't want to see women suf-

fer. Everybody now wants the heroine to behave like *Jhansi ki Rani* on the screen." The last reference is to the young queen of Jhansi, one of the leaders of the Indian mutiny of 1857. She rode to battle against the British and was killed. Women, once symbols for peace and silent suffering on screen, now portray images of destruction. The new violent goddess revels in direct physical violence. In *Pratighat*, the female lead hacks the villain to death in a public political meeting; her revenge is more satisfying because of the extreme violence. (Rahman).

The movies

Zakhmi Aurat (Wounded Woman)

The heroine, Kiran, is a gutsy police officer, impetuous and brave. She is raped by four men, but they are acquitted due to insufficient evidence. Frustrated by the judicial system, she organizes a group of women as rape vigilantes. They lure the acquitted rapists, and a doctor in their group castrates them. Kiran finally confesses to her crimes and her fiancé promises to wait for her if she serves time. The film leaves her in court; the verdict is not yet in. Presumably it is left to the audience's discretion.

Mera Shikaar (My Prey)

The central character is Bijli, a vivacious, talkative village woman. She is the breadwinner of her family, which consists of her father and two younger sisters. Unlike her sister who dreams of marriage, Bijli sees herself as a hard-fighting female

Robin Hood, who beats up men. Her village is often raided by the bandit, Changeza. She antagonizes one of his followers. To teach her a lesson, Changeza rapes her younger sister on her wedding day (she commits suicide) and brutally murders her brother-in-law. Bijli vows to avenge them and challenges him to a fight. She destroys his hideout and kills him singlehandedly.

Sherni (Lioness)

Durga is a young village woman whose family is massacred and she herself is nearly raped by the village landlord. She manages to escape to her father. Her family's last moments haunt her, and she leads a band of bandits to avenge them and rid her village of the landlord's dominance. *Khoon Baha Ganga Mein* (Blood flows into the Ganges)

Ganga is the central character of this film. Her mother is raped and killed, and her father murdered by the village landlord. She is chased, but is rescued by a gang of bandits. She grows up to become the leader of the gang. Her childhood sweetheart (also the landlord's son) is a policeman on her trail. She takes revenge on her enemies. In the end, she and her lover are both killed.

Kahani Phoolvati Ki (The Story of Phoolvati)

This is the largely fictionalized version of a female bandit who terrorized villagers in the early 80s. Phoolan was a poor woman of a low caste. She was rejected by her much older husband. On her return to her parents' village, she was gang-raped by some men of a high caste. She ran away to the ravines of Chambal, a common hideout for bandits. There she led a group of bandits to commit mass murders of men of the same caste who had raped her. In 1983, she surrendered to the police and is currently in prison.

Bhrashtachar (Corruption)

The heroine, Bhavani, is a fiery journalist and female activist. She works against a powerful politician, who is very corrupt but has an excellent public image. He had raped and murdered a



A. Ramachandran

blind girl she had rescued from a brothel, and Bhavani later discovers the politician had murdered her own father. He frames her for a murder when she writes against him, and uses his influence with the police and the judiciary to get her a death sentence. However, she is rescued by her boyfriend. Both go underground and surface while the politician is making a direct televised broadcast to his electorate. They beat him up on camera, and make him confess to his varied crimes of murder, rape, corruption, flesh trade, etc. The film ends with a message that it is up to the people to pay the price for democracy and freedom by being vigilant.

Common themes

Gentle and nurturing: In most of these films the female is a mother, central to the

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story. She is not necessarily a biological mother, but usually her younger siblings are virtually her children, and she is the primary bread-winner and care-taker of her family. Her parents, if alive, are old and/or feeble. She is extremely protective of their welfare. She protects not only her family but also her village. She protects other women from exploitation. In all these films, the women take on traditional male roles in India, as well as those perpetuated in usual Indian film fare.

A better world: Though the initial motivation is a personal vendetta, the heroine ultimately works for the larger good.

Rape: All the films deal with rape, whether it be the rape (attempted or actual) of the heroine or her loved ones. It spurs the central female character toward

purposeful revenge and is a driving force in their lives. If a rape is the angry and violent domination of a woman by a man or men, the woman's revenge almost mimics its violence and anger, but without the sexual connotations. This supports the contention that rape is an act of violence and anger. What these militant women carry with them to spur them to violence is the pain, anger, humiliation, frustration, and helplessness of the primal act of rape. All the women are plagued by nightmarish visions of the rape (theirs or someone else's) and are obsessed with these images. In the final showdown, they taunt the rapist and remind him of their own helplessness when he begs for mercy.

Socio-economic status: Except for Kiran (*Zakhmi Aurat*) and Bhavani (*Bhrashtachar*), the female leads in these movies are of a low socio-economic status. In the first part of the films, the women are humble and obsequious. When confronted with evil, they beg for mercy, and cry. Their poverty targets them for abuse at the hands of the rich who are usually the villains. In villages, the rich villain is usually personified by the village landlord. He is the major landholder and traditionally the villagers are his bonded laborers. The landlords are portrayed as debauched, corrupt, lustful, conniving, and greedy. In the city, the villain is rich and is often a powerful politician. His power is undisputed and he commands the corrupt administrative, judicial, and police machinery to persecute the heroine.

Death: This theme is not seen in *Zakhmi Aurat*. In the other films, the violent deaths of loved ones adds fire to the quest for revenge. Orphaned and totally alone, the heroine becomes an outlaw and takes up arms. This is the traditional, eternally popular image of the 'desperado'. It is, of course, unusual that the central character is female. She is fully aware of her situation. She knows she cannot return to society. Her vengeance is the only reality in her life. When she kills, she becomes cold eyed, ruthless, and blood-thirsty.

A departure from tradition

All these female characters are, of course, diametrically opposed to the traditional perfect wife or perfect mother, who have been epitomized as the ideal,

and in fact, as the only female images. The traditional Hindi film heroine touts her strengths as her capacity for love, self-sacrifice, submissiveness, and her ability to forgive (usually her errant husband). The woman worships her husband as a god and would not divorce him even if he abused her and kept mistresses. She would show her strength by worshipping him still, and serving him. Eventually he mends his ways, and she welcomes him back.

In traditional films, the woman is revered and referred to as the house goddess of wealth and prosperity. Conversely, if misfortune strikes her home, she is blamed for it. The traditional 'strong woman' is one who can withstand every ill-treatment and misfortune, uncomplaining and ready to forgive and forget.

The new physically violent woman rebels against injustice, ill-treatment, and cruelty. For her, to be passive in misfortune is to be weak; for her predecessor that was strength. The new heroines are referred to as the incarnation or personification of Durga and Kali. The reference is to the goddess ridding the earth of all evil.

Other common references are to dangerous and ferocious animals. In *Sherni*, Durga's father appoints her leader of his bandits on his death. He says, "I am proud that I am not leaving behind a weak, helpless woman; but among my trusty followers I leave behind a lioness." The lioness kills anyone who threatens her loved ones. Another common analogy is the comparison of the heroine to a she-cobra. Cobras mate for life. If the cobra is killed, his mate goes to any lengths to avenge his death.

In folklore and common culture, unbound hair also has a particular significance. When the goddess Kali possesses a person (usually a woman), her hair escapes the confines of a braid as she dances in a frenzy. Women are often advised not to visit a Kali temple with unbound hair in order to avoid possession. In all the films, the women wear braids. When they embark on their mission, their hair is always unbound. One interpretation of this would be that they are freed from the conventions imposed on women to braid their hair. By taking up weapons, they break the traditional mould. Another interpretation would be that they are possessed by the goddess Kali. When Kali goes into battle, her hair is always unbound.

The central characters are all conspicuous by the similarity of their attire after their transformation into warriors. In addition to unbound hair, they dress in black, usually leather and ride a white horse. Kali is usually shown as a dark-skinned deity, dressed in dark and somber colors. Perhaps the attire was derived from that source. The white horse could be a western derivative. From Phantom to Zorro to the Lone Ranger, the white horse seems to represent a crusader for justice in western legend.

The males in these films have changed dramatically from their traditional counterparts. They do not tell the woman to behave like a 'virtuous woman', as their predecessors would have done. They do not trivialize the woman's revenge or her feelings in any way. The man-woman relationship has changed in these films. The woman's mission is paramount in her life, and not even her love alters that. They meet on equal terms. He is no longer her protector, because she can do that herself. In older films—and some contemporary ones—the hero would beat up the bad guys while the heroine would stand and look on proudly, as 'her man' proved himself to her. In all the films I reviewed, men stand around while the female protagonist indulges in physical violence. The women are not presented as extraordinary beings. Despite the references to the goddess Durga, the women are portrayed as common people, who snap when they are persecuted. In this, they are more human than their traditional counterparts, whose patience and pain thresholds seemed too high to be true.

A Short Critique

Clearly this genre of movies has broken the traditional submissive, self-sacrificing, and placid mould. However, it is clear that these new images are also stereotypical. Despite their cathartic value for suppressed women and their entertainment value, it is doubtful that these movies will change popular perceptions of women. It is clear that these women are a new type of ideal, as much as their self-sacrificing, submissive predecessors were. That aspect alone ensures that they are not real women. They are goddesses incarnate, ideal and worshippable, but so far removed from the flesh and blood woman,

as to diminish the latter's status further. Even though they are more real in their emotional reactions to persecution than their silent suffering predecessors, they are far removed from most women.

Usually the women in these films are played by actresses who have a certain box-office draw. Clearly, the decision to make these films was determined by finances. They are formulaic films which ensure that "The cash registers do not stop ringing." (Rahman) These films have been monetary successes, which is not surprising because fantasy and escapism rule the Indian film scene. However, it is heartening that the strong woman genre has not flopped. One prominent film actress, Rekha, applauds this genre, "Times have changed, thank God...For the first time the heroine has emerged as a strong, tough woman willing to fight back, reflecting the Indian woman of today."

It is obvious that the solutions offered in these films are unrealistic and impractical. Yet there is a definite reference to the society. These films highlight the lack of law and order, and the corruption in India today. The violence provides a wishful, almost vicarious solution to problems. This may explain the success of these films. The weak groups of society, the poor and the low castes feel empowered along with the militant woman on screen, herself a member of a weak societal order as a female.

It is ironic that the land that worships strong mother images and cheers their prototypes on screen should burn women for dowry, and debase them in countless other ways. Perhaps, however, the breaking of the traditional mould on screen may herald the development of more complex female characters in Indian films. Certainly one message emerges. Do not take woman for granted: there is only so much she will endure.

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