Ganesh, lord of auspicious beginnings and father of goddess Santoshi Ma.

A Superhit Goddess
Jai Santoshi *Maa* and Caste Hierarchy in Indian Films
Part One

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"Audiences were showering coins, flower petals and rice at the screen in appreciation of the film. They entered the cinema barefoot and set up a small temple outside.... In Bandra, where mythological films aren't shown, it ran for fifty weeks. It was a miracle". —Anita Guha, (actress who played goddess Santoshi Ma; cited in Kabir 2001:115).

Genre, Film & Phenomenon

Cecil B. DeMille's famously cynical adage, "God is box office," may be applied to Indian popular cinema, the output of the world's largest film industry, albeit with certain adjustments—one must pluralise and sometimes feminise its subject. The genres known as "mythologicals" and "devotionals" were present at the creation of the Indian film and have remained hardy perennials of its vast output, yet they constitute one of the least-studied aspects of this comparatively under-studied cinema. Indeed, I will venture that for scholars and critics, mythologicals have generally been "hard to see." Yet DeMille's words also belie the fact that most mythologicals—like most commercial films of any genre—flop at the box office. The comparatively few that have enjoyed remarkable and sustained acclaim hence merit study both as religious expressions and as successful examples of popular art and entertainment.

Of the four hundred and seventy-five Indian films released in 1975, three enjoyed enormous success. All were in Hindi, the lingua franca of the entertainment industry based in Bombay (a.k.a. Mumbai), lately dubbed "Bollywood," which (although it generates less than a quarter of national cinematic output) enjoys the largest audience throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond. *Sholay* ("Flames") and *Deewar* ("The Wall"), were both heavily-promoted "multi-starrers" belonging to the then-dominant genre sometimes referred to as the *masala* ("spicy") film: a multi-course cinematic banquet incorporating suspenseful drama, romance, comedy, violent action sequences, and song and dance. Both were expensive and slickly made by the standards of the industry, and both featured Amitabh Bachchan, the male superstar whose iconic portrayal of an "angry young man" would dominate the Hindi screen for the next decade. Female characters were marginal to both, and this was not surprising given that their target audience was young urban males, who strongly identified with their themes of honor and revenge.

Superhit Goddess

The third "superhit" of 1975 could hardly have been more different, however, and came as a complete surprise to both the industry and the press. *Jai Santoshi Maa* ("Hail to the Mother of Satisfaction")[1] was a low-budget film featuring unknown actors, cheap sets and crude special effects, and a plot and audience dominated by women. Dedicated to a little-known Hindu goddess, it belonged to a film genre that had been considered marginal for more than three decades. Yet *Jai Santoshi Maa* became a runaway, word-of-mouth hit, packing cinemas in major urban centers and smaller provincial towns. It also became something more: a phenomenon that gave a new and specifically Indian inflection to the American pop phrase "cult film," for audiences commonly engaged in ritual and devotional behavior during its screenings, and temples and shrines to its titular goddess soon began to appear in many parts of India. As the years passed, the film acquired the status of a "cult classic," and was regularly revived, especially for women's matinees on Friday, the day associated with the *vrat* or ritual fast and worship of Santoshi Ma; by all accounts, hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of women periodically participated in such worship. Media accounts of the sudden emergence of a modern "celluloid goddess" attracted the interest of scholars interested in the impact of film on religion and popular culture, and as a result *Jai Santoshi Maa* became unique among mythological films by becoming the subject of a modest scholarly literature. To establish a context for my own examination of the film, I will briefly survey the history of mythologicals and their evaluation (or more typically,

omission) by scholars, as well as the responses, from several disciplinary perspectives, to the Santoshi Ma film and phenomenon.

Early Mythologicals

The chronology of early cinema in India closely paralleled its development in the West, from the first demonstration of the Lumière brothers' cinématograph in Bombay in July of 1896, only six months after its unveiling in Europe. Both in its technology and content, early cinema carried the cachet (or stigma) of being a foreign innovation, and was largely confined to the new commercial cities of the British Raj, where it was patronised by European residents and the Anglophone elite. Even after Indian producers became active—this is generally dated to May of 1913, when D. G. Phalke released

his 50-minute feature *Raja Harishchandra*—the bulk of films shown on Indian screens continued to be foreign, with American output dominating, a situation that prevailed until well into the sound era of the 1930s.[2] Both nationalism and religious feeling inflect Phalke's oft-quoted account of his 1911 viewing of a film called *The Life of Christ*, which caused him to mentally visualise "the Gods, Shri Krishna, Shri Ramchandra," and to ponder the question, "Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?" (Rajadhyaksha 1993:49). Phalke's 1913 effort, based on an episode in the *Mahabharata*, was the first of nearly a hundred films he would make over the next two decades, almost all based on epic and *(puranic)* tales. These included *Lanka Dahan* ("The Burning of Lanka," 1917), depicting the monkey Hanuman's exploits in the *Ramayana* and said to have been "India's first big box-office hit" (Rangoonwalla 1983:33), and *Shri Krishna Janma* ("The Birth of Lord Krishna," 1918). The appearance of the divine incarnations Rama and Krishna in the latter two films is said to have elicited a powerful response from

Babubhai Mistri's 1965 *Mahabharat*, Krishna displays his cosmic form to Arjuna in a scene recapitulating conventions of popular poster art.

viewers, as "…men and women in the audience prostrated themselves before the screen" (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:15). Significantly, Phalke seems to have catered to—indeed, helped to create—a different audience than that which patronised foreign films. He advertised in vernacular newspapers rather than in the English-language press, and took his shows to the hinterland, often by bullock cart, to offer inexpensive screenings to rural audiences who sat on the ground before makeshift screens (ibid.).

Other producers followed Phalke's example. The Elphinstone Bioscope Company of Calcutta issued its own version of the Harishchandra story, nearly double the length of Phalke's, in 1917, and later that year offered *Prahlad Charitra* ("The Deeds of Prahlad"), based on the *Bhagavata Purana* story of a legendary devotee of Vishnu (Rangoonwalla 1983:33). The first film made in south India was 1919's *Keechaka Vadham* ("The Slaying of Keechaka"), likewise adapted from the *Mahabharata*. Such films, which themselves celebrated *swadeshi* or indigenous manu-facture, embodied a nationalist message through traditional tales presented via a fascinating new technology; they helped to draw new constituencies into the cinema, and into a project of Indian modernity. Other films of the period centred on the legendary biographies of poet saints of the medieval *bhakti* tradition, such as *Bilwamangal* and *Kabir Kamal* (both 1919; ibid. 34-35). Such hagiographic films were sometimes called "devotionals," to distinguish them from "mythologicals," which featured divine and semi-divine heroes. However, many accounts merge both under the umbrella label "mythological" (Dharap 1983:80).

New Competing Genres

Mythological/devotional films accounted for all but one of the twenty-five feature films made by Indian producers prior to 1920 (Rangoonwalla 1983:35), but cinematic content changed rapidly in the next decade. Dhiren Ganguli's *Bilat Ferat* ("England Returned," 1921), offered a contemporary comedy of manners, and Madan Theatres' *Barer Bazar* ("Marriage Market," 1922) dramatised a social problem (ibid. 40-49). There were historical dramas like *Simgadh* ("The Fortress of Simgadh," 1923), on the life of the Maratha king Shivaji, and thrillers like *Kala Naag* ("Black Cobra," 1924), based on a sensational murder case in Bombay (ibid. 49-50; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1995:227). The variety of nascent genres suggested by these titles reflects the pressure of competition within a growing industry (by 1930, India was producing close to 200 films per year), which caused filmmakers to seek new sources of appealing narrative. Mythologicals continued to be produced (and re-produced: e.g., the *Mahabharata* tale of Savitri had been filmed at least eight times by 1937; Barnouw and Krishhnaswamy 1980:100), but they comprised a shrinking percentage of output. According to B. V. Dharap, they accounted for roughly seventy per cent of films made prior to 1923, but only fifteen per cent of those made between 1923 and 1930 (Dharap 1983:80). They experienced a brief resurgence with the coming of sound in 1931, accounting for some forty per cent of films during the next three years, but then their output fell again, to an average of between five and ten per cent of annual production (ibid. 81). These statistics cover the whole of India and thus include regions of the South where mythological films continued to be made in sizeable

numbers (e.g., the Telugu language cinema of Andhra Pradesh; Shah 1950:120-122). In the dominant Hindi language cinema, according to Nasreen Munni Kabir, the mythological "had virtually disappeared by the 1950s" (Kabir 2001:114)—a fact that would make the success of *Jai Santoshi Maa* more striking.

Absence of Scholarly Study

There exists no major scholarly study of the mythological film genre, and only a handful of articles devoted to it. This is surprising, since mythologicals constituted the most distinctive early product of Indian cinema, one that "earmarked for the Indian film an area of subject matter that won for it an immediate and powerful hold in India and neighbouring countries.…" (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:20). Moreover, these films were instrumental in "laying down the operative norms of Indian films, both in form and content, which are still in use after seventy years" (Rangoonwalla 1983:31). Yet beyond the Phalke era (to which the two preceding quotes refer), standard surveys of Indian cinema make, at most, only scattered reference to mythologicals (e.g., Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:90-91, 100-101, 173; Chakravarty 1993:2, 35-36, 42), and the most theoretically ambitious recent study of popular cinema, M. Madhava Prasad's *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, dispenses with them in two footnotes (Prasad 1998:4, n.3; 135, n.19).

Decline of Mythological

Explanations for the fluctuating commercial fortunes of these films have been offered, however. The preference of early directors for mythological subjects has been attributed to the social and technical constraints they faced: in order to reach a mass, multi-lingual, and

largely illiterate audience without the use of sound, they relied on culturally familiar stories that permitted them to develop complex narratives without dialogue (Kabir 2001:110). Such narrative familiarity was relied on whenever a new technology was introduced, which explains the brief resurgence of mythologicals in the early sound era (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:90).[3] This argument may be further extended to the expansion of television viewing in the 1980s, which received a boost from phenomenally popular serialised versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*—the most successful examples of mythological-style entertainment after *Jai Santoshi Maa* (Lutgendorf 1990:127-141).

A further explanation for the decline of the mythological is that it was subsumed within an emerging super-genre—usually termed the "social," a label loosely applied to any film set in modern times— that assumed a cinematically-sophisticated audience and that abounded in inter-textual allusions to epic and *(puranic)* myths as well as to folklore, current events, and previous films (Booth 1995, 2000; Thomas 1987:304; cf. Prasad on the emergence of the "social" as "the all-inclusive film" which absorbed other genres; 1998:46-47, 135-136). The implicit argument that mythologicals marked a transitional phase in Indian cinematic practice, offering accessible entertainments that, among other things, *taught Indians how to watch films*, is one to which I will return in reference to *Jai Santoshi Maa*, a film that, once again, seems to have drawn new audiences into cinema halls.

Political Allegories

What is the cause for the scholarly neglect of mythological films? The slim literature on the topic bears a tone that is variously apologetic, disapproving, or dismissive— suggesting that mythological films are, frankly, embarrassing: the most tawdry and regressive products of an otherwise much-maligned industry, and the expressions of a religious vision that is particularly alien to "progressive" and westernised sensibilities. Attempts to rehabilitate the genre approvingly note the veiled political motives of some early filmmakers; thus P. K. Nair observes that, under the strict censorship of British authorities, ancient stories of demon-slaying heroes could serve as allegorical critiques of the colonial Raj (cited in Kabir 2001:103-105). This is an argument indirectly supported by some of Phalke's own writings, as well as by historical evidence concerning the reception of specific films—thus the 1919 film *Sairandhree*, about the attempted rape of the *Mahabharata* heroine Draupadi, is said to have been widely interpreted as a critique of the policies of the Viceroy, Lord Curzon (Dharap 1983:82). Similarly, Geeta Kapur's appreciative if headily theoretical analysis of *Sant Tukaram* ("Saint Tukaram," 1936), one of the most popular "devotionals" of the early sound era, characterises it as a "naïve" Gandhian nationalist allegory with implicitly subaltern sympathies (Kapur 1987:79-96). Such arguments are not without merit, and may be applied equally well to older performance forms—for religious storytelling in India has often made allusions to social and political conditions—but they are clearly not the whole story, and ignore issues of reception based on class and gender, as well as considerations of religious meaning.

Caste Hierarchy in Films

Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar's playful "caste system" of film genres—which posits the mythological as *brahman* (priest/ sage), the historical film as *kshatriya* (warrior/aristocrat), and the action-packed "stunt film" as *shudra* (serf/ manual laborer; Kakar 1989:25)—has some validity for the early cinema. Many conservative and pious people condemned films as corrupting and immoral—likely to "arouse passion and cause sexual promiscuity, leading to masturbation, loss of eyesight, and…impotence" (Khare 1985:142), but would sometimes make

Telugu mythological Narthanasala based on a *Mahabharata* episode, N. T. Rama Rao in drag as Arjuna-turned-transvestite Brihannala.

an exception for religious films. Thus Mahatma Gandhi, who disapproved of cinema, is said to have seen only one film in his lifetime: Vijay Bhatt's 1945 mythological *Ram Rajya*—"Rama's Reign" (Dharap 1983:82). "Stunt films" popular in the 1930s and 40s, featuring avenger-style superheroes intervening in defense of underdogs, appealed particularly to the urban working classes. Yet Kakar's invocation of ancient *varna* categories obscures other social divisions in contemporary India. As noted earlier, Phalke targeted his mythological films at a vernacular-speaking and partly-rural audience rather than the urban middle class who patronised Anglo-European films. In subsequent decades, stunt films and mythologicals were in fact often made by the same studios, whose directors "talked of mythologicals as 'nothing more than stunt films that happen to be about gods'" (Thomas 1987:304-305). Both were aimed at less-educated and generally less-prosperous audiences, urban for the stunt films, rural for mythologicals—though the latter were also known to appeal particularly to women (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:47; Shah 1950:106).

Although the advent of sound led to Indian-language films gradually edging out foreign competition, the growing status of English as elite lingua franca led to new conventions of coding for target audiences. In Bombay cinema, "A-grade" films (generally "socials") displayed their titles and credits in Roman script and using English terminology ("director," etc.), and peppered their dialogue with English words and phrases. The fact that the opening credits of *Jai Santoshi Maa* appear entirely in Devanagari script and feature Sanskritised-Hindi neologisms (e.g. *digdarßak* for "director") is an

immediate signal that it aims for a different audience, as Bombay journalist Ashok Banker forthrightly observes in his notes on the film.

By the 1970s mythological movies were seen as downmarket and vernac, suitable only for films made in other ethnic Indian languages. (Vernac is short for vernacular. It is a common Indian English word for a person of an ethnic Indian background without much education, English or sophistication who speaks only a local 'vernacular' language. The equivalent of a country bumpkin or backwoods bozo. [sic]) So when this low-budget B-movie broke all records to become one of the highest-grossing films of the year…it took everyone by surprise. (Banker 2001:59)

Such observations suggest that, in the "caste system" of post-Independence Bombay cinema, where the "stunt film" was subsumed within the omnibus *masala* "social" aimed at urban male audiences, it was the "downmarket and vernac" mythological that became the cultural *shudra* of film genres—shunned by "sophisticated" audiences, as well as by the neo-brahmins of academia.

Lower Class Kitsch?

There are other problems with mythologicals. On an aesthetic level, their cheap production values and special effects, evoking the staging conventions of rustic folk theater and lower-class notions of opulence, are perceived as gaudy kitsch by wealthier and more educated people. Further, such films typically portray the Hindu gods displaying human emotions such as desire, fear, anger, and jealousy. Such portrayals pose little problem for rural and more traditional audiences, for whom even laughter at the gods can coexist comfortably with feelings of awe and devotion. But they are at odds with two influential currents in elite discourse: a Protestantised ideology of religion, absorbed through English-medium education, that advocates solemnity and dignity in the portrayal of divinities, and a brahmanical and lingering orientalist preference for *advaita* monism, that holds the worship of physically-embodied deities to represent a "lower" level of theological understanding. To these must of course be added the overall hostility

In a episode form Sagar's *Ramayan*, Hanuman (Dara Singh) confronts the submarine demoness Simhika

to religious expression of Marxism and psychoanalysis, two of the most influential ideologies of the humanist academy during the second half of the twentieth century.

Many Indian intellectuals of the post-Independence era nurtured the hope that technological and economic progress would gradually solve the "problem of religion" in their famously-devout land. Dharap's essay on mythologicals is saturated with the vocabulary of Victorian rationalism, invoking "fatalism" as a catch-all for everything that is wrong with India: "…so long as ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, superstition rule the large mass of people in this country; so long as fatalism is taken for granted, such pictures will always have an audience…." (Dharap 1983:83). Remarking on the devotional reaction to Phalke's early films, Dharap sneers that "the illiterate spectators actually prostrated themselves, taking the screen-Gods as real." There is indeed a curiously naïve faith displayed here: Dharap's own assumption that a "scientific" understanding of cinematic artifice properly precludes the experience of "real" divinity—this despite the fact that Hindus routinely and knowingly impute divinity to iconic materialisations of all sorts, permanent and transient, natural and manufactured: from clods of earth to painted surfaces to consecrated human actors.[4] The persistence of such cinematic idolatry is especially troubling to Dharap, and he attributes it to the "illiterate, ignorant and hence, credulous" nature of Indian viewers: "Even after seven decades of films, gullible members of the audience were seen laying themselves prostrate before the screen deity in motion picture theatres throughout the country, when *Jai Santoshi Maa* was shown" (Dharap 1983:82). Yet, as already noted, the outstanding success of a handful of mythological films, and the failure of many others, suggests that even the "illiterate" and "credulous" can be discriminating cinema goers. The question of what made *Jai Santoshi Maa* one of the most successful films of its period remains unaddressed.

Goddess Analysed

Given the above, it is not surprising that the modest literature on *Jai Santoshi Maa* reflects mainly the work of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of Indian art and religion, rather than of film scholars. Although these authors provide a good deal of insight into the Santoshi Ma cult, I think it is fair to say that, broadly speaking, they are more interested in Hindu goddesses than in Hindi films, and show relatively little interest in the aesthetic and narrative qualities that contributed to the film's success.

Sociologist Veena Das's 1980 essay on the film includes a synopsis of its plot, but quickly moves to an ambitious typology of mother goddesses within which she situates Santoshi Ma; she then speculates on the socio-religious concerns of the film's primary fans, whom she identifies as lower-class urban women. Although Das makes factual errors that suggest a perhaps cursory viewing of the film (thus she identifies the Santoshi Ma fast as comprising twelve Fridays rather than sixteen, and asserts that the goddess becomes angry with her devotee in the climactic scene), she offers, albeit in passing, two penetrating and related observations. These concern the relative centrality of the human heroine ("It seems to me that in an important sense one may justifiably ask whether the true subject of this story is not Santoshi Ma, but Satyavati"; Das 1980:49), and the parallel structure of the film's two main narratives, divine and human ("Every significant chain of events relating to Satyavati points to a successive movement in the evolution of Santoshi Ma…."; ibid.). Surprisingly, neither of these insights seems to have been pursued in subsequent scholarship, but I will return to them shortly.

Four years after Das's essay appeared, a panel on "Santoshi Ma, the Film Goddess" was presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, showcasing the work of young Western scholars who had become interested in the film and cult.[5] Art historian Michael Brand traced the history of the goddess' worship to the early 1960s, when five temples to Santoshi Ma were dedicated at widely-separated sites in northern India. He also showed how the iconography of the goddess, which seems to have developed during the same period, rapidly became standardised through poster images. Brand's paper indicates that the cult of Santoshi Ma was already spreading among women—through word of mouth, pamphlet literature, and poster art—well before the making of the film. Indeed, it was reportedly one woman's devotion to Santoshi Ma, acquired through a pilgrimage to a temple in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, that made her urge her filmmaker husband, Vijay Sharma, to "spread the goddess's message" through the cinematic medium (Hawley 1996:4).

Another presenter on the AAR panel was Kathleen Erndl, whose work on Santoshi Ma was part of research on goddess cults of the Punjab hills, which eventually resulted in the monograph *Victory to the Mother* (1993). Its chapter on "The Goddess and Popular Culture" devotes a section to Santoshi Ma, who "has taken all of northern India by storm"; yet Erndl says little about the film, beyond noting its massive popularity (Erndl 1993:141-152). She summarises

Santoshi Ma's story based on written sources, and identifies the goddess with the lion-riding Sheranvali popular in northwestern India, an unmarried goddess who is both virgin and mother, and whose historic worship through *shakta* and *tantric* ritual (including blood sacrifice) has been sanitised, in recent times, by her increasingly urban and middle class devotees (ibid. 3-6). Contra Das and Brand, Erndl argues that there is nothing particularly "new" about Santoshi Ma, apart from her unusually rapid diffusion through the media of print, film, and radio (ibid. 144).

Another presenter at the 1984 panel was Stanley Kurtz, then a graduate student in anthropology at Harvard, working on a dissertation on the *Santoshi Ma* cult. In the course of his fieldwork, Kurtz concluded, like Erndl, that *Santoshi Ma* was not perceived by devotees as distinctive or new, and was in fact confused with other popular goddesses (Kurtz 1992: 2-4, 15-16). Like Das, he became principally interested in creating a comprehensive typology of female deities, but in the service of a yet more ambitious agenda: a reworking of

Freudian theory to account for the different cultural aims of Hindu childrearing. His resulting book, *All the Mothers are One* (1992) includes an extended discussion of both the printed and cinematic narratives of Santoshi Ma, focusing on the tension Kurtz identifies between an Indian child's "natural" and "in-law" mothers (the women of its father's family, who play a key role in childrearing; ibid. 111-131). Kurtz's critique of the cultural biases inherent in earlier psychological studies of Indian childhood is often fascinating, yet his use of Freud's theory of infantile sexuality to explain the multiplicity of Hindu goddesses (as reflecting unconscious memories of early experiences with multiple female caregivers) is certainly open to question.

The analyses of both Das and Kurtz explain the popularity of *Jai Santoshi Maa* in terms of factors that are unseen by and (in a conscious sense) unknown to most of its viewers. In this process of peering, as it were, beneath the surface of the film, that surface appears to have largely been overlooked—indeed, it is Kurtz's stated intent to "dissolve"

the apparent specificity of Santoshi Ma into a generic Mother Goddess shaped by infantile experience (ibid. 13-28). Yet there are many aspects of this film that Indian viewers may be expected to "see" and understand quite readily, and that seek to engage them through reference to familiar beliefs, discourses, and practices. It is my conviction that a re-reading of the film in terms of such contextual elements will reveal *Jai Santoshi Maa* to be an intelligent, witty, and well-crafted film that deserves the success it has enjoyed. I will argue that, within its aesthetic conventions of flatly-painted backdrops and gaudily-costumed gods who appear and disappear with a clash of cymbals, the film presents a carefully-structured narrative abounding in references to folklore and mythology and offering trenchant commentary on social convention; it also develops a "visual theology" that is particularly relevant to female viewers. In addition, I will propose that Das's pioneering and commendable effort to place the film in a socio-historical perspective, may now, more than two decades later, be reconsidered.[6]   ❑