

Frames per Second: The birth of the mother

Rewatching *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975) in the age of Kali

Uttaran Das Gupta July 18, 2022 Last Updated at 15:15 IST

In the opening scene of the blockbuster, mythological Hindi film *Jai Santoshi Maa* (Vijay Sharma, 1975), Ganesh gives birth to a daughter at the request of his sons. They want a sister who can tie them a *rakhi*. This is a deft narrative move by the film's makers, providing the Hindu goddess Santoshi Mata with a Puranic lineage, paving the way for her pan-Indian popularity. Historian Wendy Doniger in her landmark study of Hinduisim, *The Hindus* (2009), writes that Santoshi was first worshipped by women in some cities of Uttar Pradesh in the 1960s, becoming popular only with the success of the film. "During screenings, the theatre became a temple, and women made offerings, pujas of fruit and flower on the stage in front of the screen," she writes. "The medium was certainly the message here."

The "devotional" or "mythological" film is inalienably linked to the very roots of Indian cinema. Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), the first feature-length film made by an Indian, was adapted from a Mahabharata story, establishing the mythological genre, which film scholar Rachel Dwyer in her book *Filming the Gods* (2006), claims is "unique to India". Film historian Feroze Rangoonwala claims that only one out of 25 films produced by Indians before 1920 was not a mythological/devotional. While they continued to be made throughout the 1920s and enjoyed a brief revival with the coming of sound in 1931, they represented a diminishing share of the total output of Indian cinema. By the 1950s, they had "virtually disappeared" in the Hindi film industry based out of Bombay (Mumbai), writes film scholar Nasreen Munni Kabir in *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story* (2001). Thus, the success of *Jai Santoshi Maa* took many by surprise.

The surprising box office performance of the film, a somewhat strange affirmation of Cecil B. DeMille's much-quoted remark "God is box office", led to the revival of the mythological genre in Hindi films. The film's influence, with its calendar art visuals and camp narrative of divine miracles, can be seen in *Deewar* (Yash Chopra, 1975), where the protagonist *Vijay* (Amitabh Bachchan) offers himself as a *balidan* (sacrifice) to save his ailing mother (Nirupa Roy) or *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Manmohan Desai, 1977), where one of the three titular characters Akbar (Rishi Kapoor) takes his blind mother (Nirupa Roy) to a shrine of Sai Baba. "Two blobs of light (you can see them, they are there) issue from the saint's eyes and travel across the screen in a panning shot over the congregation, stop at the mother's eyes and enter into them. Now she can see," writes film critic Chidananda Dasgupta in his essay 'Seeing and Believing, Science and Mythology':

Such miracles are also common in the popular TV serials of the 1980s, *Ramayana* (Ramanand Sagar 1987-88) and *Mahabharat* (B R Chopra, Ravi Chopra, 1988-90), as well as films in the 1990s. In *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994), star-crossed lovers are reunited by a very intelligent dog after one of the characters prays to the domestic deity. In *Karan Arjun* (Rakesh Roshan, 1995), a curry western revenge drama, the two protagonists, Karan (Salman Khan) and Arjun (Shah Rukh Khan), are reincarnated because of the prayers of their mother (Rakhee Gulzar) to Goddess Kali to take revenge on their uncle (Amrish Puri). He bumped them off in their previous lives. While the miraculous and divine machinery used by Indian filmmakers in mythological/devotional films and other genres might seem a little silly or convenient, they reveal some important anxieties and aspirations of the spectators.

This has been recognised by not only film scholars but also anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists. In a landmark essay, “The Mythological Film and its Framework of Meaning: An Analysis of *Jai Santoshi Ma*” (1981), anthropologist Veena Das locates the neo-cult of Santoshi Mata in a genealogy of Hindu goddesses and shows that the film depicts a struggle for supremacy between the principles of *shakti* and *sati*. Das also shows that *shakti* goddesses such as Durga or Chamunda are not framed by their male consorts — in fact, Kali is most commonly represented as standing on the body of Shiva. On the other hand, *sati* goddesses such as Saraswati, Parvati, Gouri, or Santoshi often appear with their male counterparts. Santoshi’s popularity is not because she can defeat demons but because she can grant simple desires such as a household appliance for the devotee or a promotion for the devotee’s husband.

Film scholar M K Raghavendra builds upon this thesis and provides a topicality to it in his book *Seduced by the Familiar: Narration and Meaning in Indian Popular Cinema* (2008): “Veena Das does not make the association but Indira Gandhi was often compared to Shakti at the time of the Emergency, and India’s best-known painter M. F. Hussain painted a famous series of pictures showing Mrs Gandhi as Shakti. The defeat of the Shakti goddesses and the emergence of the gentle and benevolent Maa Santoshi apparently have more immediate resonances.” Political scientist Vijay Prasad provides a radically different interpretation in his essay ‘Emergency Assessments’ (1996) and claims that the popularity of *Jai Santoshi Maa* and the Bengali film *Baba Taraknath* (Sunil Banerjee, 1977) reflected a turn in India’s socio-political-economic culture towards a traditional and resurgent Hinduism in the late-1970s and early-1980s, prefiguring the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party. “Now one could be a universal capitalist as well as take a holiday-pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi,” he writes.

Philip Lutgendorf, a scholar of Hindi and Indian studies, has written several essays on *Jai Santoshi Maa*, trying to decode the reasons for its popularity. In one of these essays, ‘Ritual reverb: Two “blockbuster” Hindi films’ (2014), he compares it to *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* and claims that the ritual pleasures offered by both — of the Hindu marriage and the vrata kathas — to the audience are also the reasons for their popularity. In another essay, ‘*Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited*’, Lutgendorf claims that the film satisfies the anxieties of middle- or lower-class women in the socio-political flux of the Emergency (1975-77). This audience was unaddressed by the other blockbusters of the same time, such as *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975) and *Deewar*.

While Santoshi is a “simple goddess”, satisfying simple needs, worshipping other goddesses can be problematic. The recent controversy over a film poster depicting Kali smoking shows that iconography of the mother figure continues to be a site of contest. There are no easy blessings to address it.

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