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Filming the Gods

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Religion and Indian cinema

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12-62

## The mythological film

Phalke states: 'I began the film industry in India in the year 1912'. (ICC III: 869). In fact, the first film was shown in India in 1896 and, although screenings of these and other films were successful, it was seventeen years before Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*, the first entirely Indian film, was made.<sup>1</sup> However, the intervening years saw Indians working with non-Indians to learn about film making and Phalke's own training in other visual arts (see below) speaks volumes about the preparation that went into the formation of this cinema. Indian cinema's roots lie in so many of the arts (theatre, music, painting, photography, literature, dance, story telling) as well as in other aspects of culture that were stimulated by the colonial encounter and the new media that developed during the nineteenth century.

It would be fascinating to have more accounts of the beginnings of Indian cinema but apart from writings by Phalke<sup>2</sup> and J.B.H. Wadia's largely unpublished memoirs,<sup>3</sup> we have very little in the way of eyewitness reports. However, we have the extensive and invaluable source of the Indian Cinematograph Committee's Report and Evidences of 1927-8 (RICC and ICC I-V), which dates from the last years of the silent film in India and give us a great deal of information about the state of the industry, the cinema halls, the audiences and so on from across British India.<sup>4</sup> However, since the interviewees had to speak English, we only have the views of the elites and we know little about what the 'ordinary person' thought of cinema. We know which genres certain segments of the audience enjoyed but we do not have any information about why they enjoyed them and what they thought of them. We can reconstruct some of these views from advertisements in newspapers and specialist magazines but the former often ignored cinema while many of the latter publications have not yet been made publicly available, if they exist at all.

Reading the ICC Evidences, I was struck to find that so much of the discourse around cinema today in India is similar to that of almost a hundred years ago. Why has Indian cinema, which itself changed so much, been trapped by this discourse, which perceives it as backwards, inferior to the west, in need of censoring to 'protect' the lower classes, and in

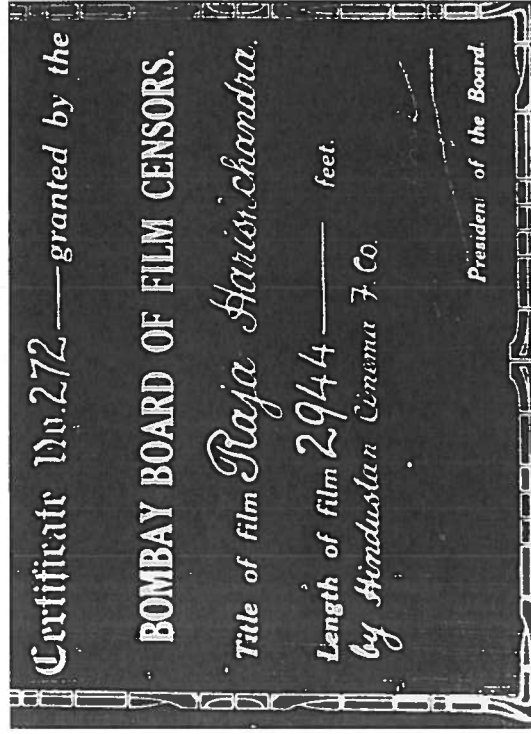


Figure 1.1 *Raja Harishchandra* (1913, dir. D.G. Phalke). The first film made in India.

financial crisis and so on? Why does it focus on the failings rather than the success? Statistics quoted in Shah (1950) show the inexorable rise of cinema in India (1950, Ch. 3), although it remains relatively small in proportion to the population in comparison with the United States and Europe. However, by 1939 cinema was the eighth largest industry in India and the third largest cinema in the world (Shah 1950: 60). It has an audience throughout India, albeit concentrated in the urban centres, and was distributed in areas where the Indian diaspora were settled (East Africa, South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Federated Malay States, Iraq and West Indies (Shah 1950: 55)).

Much academic writing on Indian cinema focuses on it as a major vehicle for nationalist discourses, but, although one or two of the interviewees refer to the nationalist movement and several film makers (such as J.B.H. Wadia) were actively involved with the freedom struggle, this topic is rarely mentioned in the Evidences. Indeed, the names of many of the companies (Imperial, Minerva) and the names of the cinemas (Albert, Coronation, Wellington) suggest a different view and I shall reassess the importance of nationalism in looking at these films.

As nationalism, cinema is often said to be a new religion (Lyden 2003). While there are striking shared features, the analogy should not be pushed

too far.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, these features cannot be ignored and one of my concerns is to examine the universal and particular features of cinema in India. Hindu and Indian are often conflated (sometimes to dangerous effect), but given that Hinduism is almost exclusively associated with South Asia and its diaspora, this makes the analysis of the culturally particular relatively straightforward in the case of the mythological film.

### The mythological among other genres

As feature films began to form into genres in the US, the religious film developed from the filming of Passion Plays<sup>6</sup> to Cecil B. DeMille's big-budget productions such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *The King of Kings* (1927).<sup>7</sup> DeMille's much-quoted remark that 'God is box office' was certainly true of these and other films, whose attractions included great spectacle and often special effects for miracles as well as providing audiences with religious experiences.

The first films made in India before Phalke were by Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatawdekar (1868–58), better known as Save Dada. He made several shorts including one of a wrestling match in the Hanging Gardens, Bombay and another on monkeys (both 1899), as well as some actualities including the return from Cambridge of a famous mathematician (*Sir Wrangler Mr R.P. Paranjpye*, 1902) and the celebrations of the coronation of Edward VII (*Delhi Durbar of Lord Curzon*, 1903),<sup>8</sup> while Hiralal Sen (1866–1917) shot plays from Star Theatres and Classic Theatre, Calcutta from 1898. However, the first all-Indian feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, was a 'mythological', a genre which is unique to India.<sup>9</sup> The mythological has been given prominence in India as its founding genre and because of Phalke's eminence (and the survival of so much of his output) but it has always been perceived to be in decline and many other genres were popular during the silent period in Bombay including the stunt or action film, the historical,<sup>10</sup> the Arabian Nights Oriental fantasy (see Chapter 3) and the social (see Chapter 4). (Other regions preferred different genres; for example Bengal, with its rich literature, preferred more intellectual and social themes drawn from novels or filmed stage plays.)

Some sources give early genres as mythological, religious, historical and stunt (Shah 1950: 43), with some distinguishing the mythological from the folkloric while others regard them as the same, and yet others separate the devotional and religious (Shah 1950: 116). The RICC (p. 34)<sup>11</sup> notes the major genres as mythological or religious, historical and social dramas, before saying that there are two or three companies which specialise in mythological films.<sup>12</sup>

The advertisements of the early periodicals are not consistent in their generic categories. For example, Variety Film Service, in its magazine advertisements, lists its 1931 and 1932 releases as: Special exclusive (included

Biblical themes such as *Sodom and Gomorrah*, *Judith and Holofernes*); social; jungle; Oriental, romantic (including *Sampson and Dalilah*, *INRI*) and semi-Oriental; stunt and fighting.<sup>13</sup> The Gujarati journal *Manu Majah* during the 1930s refers to *paurnik* films, which could mean literally from the *Puranas* (Hindu myths) or could mean more broadly mythological/legendary. The Hindi journal *Rajapat* of the late 1940s has adverts for *samaajik* ('social'), *dharmaik* ('religious'), *aitihaasik* ('historical') and stunt.

Kusum Gokarn devotes a whole chapter of her study to a discussion of the discreteness of the mythological and devotional to conclude that there is just one genre (Gokarn n.d.: 86–92), the 'religious' film, but I am maintaining the division here between the two types as it seems to me that they are differentiated by their production houses, their style and content, their advertising and reception.

Although the genres of early Indian cinema were recognised by the film makers and the audiences, no generic category is watertight and Indian cinema's notoriously fuzzy genres are even more porous than most. However, I define the mythological, the founding genre of Indian cinema, and one of the most productive genres of its early cinema, as one which depicts tales of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines<sup>14</sup> mostly from the large repository of Hindu myths, which are largely found in the Sanskrit *Puranas*, and the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The early mythological genre drew on a wide range of the modern and the traditional to create its own distinctive hybrid style, with strong connections to nineteenth-century Indian popular or middlebrow public culture as well as with other forms of cinema that were emerging at the same time in other places in the world.

Some films blur these generic boundaries, notably the much-discussed *Jai Santoshi Maa* (see below), which has many elements of the social (the heroine is fictional and lives in some vaguely contemporary world) or the devotional (the film concentrates on her devotion to the goddess), but, I argue, the actual manifestation of the gods in human form separates it from the social where the miraculous is usually shown as acting through an image or other medium, and is distinguished from the devotional, which focuses on the life of a human devotee who is presented in historical time. Of course, for many devotees of Rama, the *yuga* (aeon) in which he was on earth is historical time and he continues to live in the present time, but I am referring to the narrow, academic definition of historical time. In many devotional films, the historical figure of the devotee enters into divine time and space, so Narsi Mehta witnesses the Vrajilala (episodes from Krishna's pastoral idyll), but the film's focus is on Narsi and his devotion. The mythological is defined by the stories of the gods and goddesses – or heroes and heroines – themselves, so *Jai Santoshi Maa* also tells the story of the goddess herself, how she is born and how she gains recognition among the older goddesses.

The mythological genre is defined largely in terms of its narrative. It may recount the story of gods and goddesses, whose oldest versions we have in the Sanskrit *Puranas*,<sup>15</sup> which have been retold over the centuries.<sup>16</sup> Each *Purana* contains the stories associated with particular deities, so Krishna's *lila* or 'life' is told in the *Bhagavata Purana*. However, the films have drawn more closely on India's two great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.<sup>17</sup> While these texts are traditionally the work of single authors (Vyasa and Valmiki respectively), historical analysis finds them to be the result of oral composition and as such there is no original text of either, nor is there one single, correct version but there are many versions of each epic (Richman 1991). Their origins are at least non-Brahminical, judging from the names of the characters and given that the *Ramayana* story is first found in Buddhist sources. However, they have been fully incorporated into Hindu religious literature, as key characters are seen as incarnations of gods, the *Mahabharata* now being called the 'fifth Veda'. Although these Sanskrit texts are the oldest extant versions we have of these stories,<sup>18</sup> and are still sources of powerful narratives and imagery, they have no claim to primacy and they should not be read as 'original', because of the plurality of traditions in India. We should also note that the Sanskrit tradition is predominantly the culture of the male and the high caste, while other tellings are found among women, Dalits and other subaltern groups. There are still many other tellings of episodes from these epics, whether sung by bards, performed in plays, depicted in comics, made into films and television dramas or simply told as household tales.

The core of the *Mahabharata* was composed around the second or third century BC, although some sections are much older. Various episodes, stories and even whole texts (such as the *Bhagavad Gita*) have been interpolated, with it reaching its present form of around 100,000 stanzas, some time around the fourth century AD. The central story is the dispute over the throne between the descendants of King Bharata, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, which ends in a great war. Although some films cover large parts of the stories, most concentrate on a single episode which they narrate in some detail and adapt to suit the narrative conventions of cinema.

There is no one original version of the story of Rama, the *Ramayana*, there being many tellings in genres ranging from folktales to texts to television serials in India and in South-east Asia, in Hindu traditions and among Buddhists and Jains. There are several key versions, each of which has become the hegemonic version in particular times and places: the Sanskrit *Ramayana* of Valmiki (composed between the second century BC and the second century AD), the Tamil *Iravayatarani* of Kampan (ninth century) and the Hindi (Avadhi) *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas (sixteenth century),<sup>19</sup> and the staging of the *Ramaila*, which has contributed to making

Rama the most popular deity in northern India (Kapur 1993b: 85). The story is roughly the same and while many films tell the whole story (the *Sampoorna Ramayana* or 'complete Ramayana'), others may do so while foregrounding certain episodes.

Sita's hand is won by Rama, eldest son of Dasharatha, king of Ayodhya. When the king abdicates, he is tricked by his youngest wife into banishing Rama and handing his kingdom to her son, Bharata. Rama, Sita and his brother Lakshman go into fourteen years of exile in the forest. A demoness, Surpanakha, repulsed by Rama when she tries to seduce him, attacks Sita, provoking Lakshman to mutilate her to punish her for her erotic desire. Her brother Ravana, wishing to avenge his beloved sister and enticed by her tales of the beauty of Sita, carries Sita off to his kingdom of Lanka. Rama's devotee, Hanuman, finds Sita, sets Ravana's city ablaze then brings Rama and his armies to rescue Sita. Rama takes Sita back only after she has undergone a trial of fire to prove that she is pure after living in the house of another man. Rumours persist in Ayodhya, where Rama is restored to the throne, and Rama banishes the pregnant Sita from his kingdom. She gives birth to twin boys, Lav and Kush, in a hermitage. She asks the earth to open to allow her to return; Rama ascends into heaven.

These stories from the *Puranas* and the epics have long been mediated by pre-existing genres and media, ranging across Sanskrit texts, narrative retellings, folktales, songs, poems, music paintings which had already established a combination of visual, musical and dramatic conventions before the new nineteenth-century forms of urban theatre, photography and chromolithographs.<sup>20</sup>

The early genres – the mythological, the devotional and the historical – drew for their idea of clothes from art, chromolithography, religious processions and performances, folk and urban theatre, and foreign cinema. These were often anachronistic, so the *choli* ('blouse'), which became popular only in the nineteenth century, was worn in many films for the sake of modesty.

The folk theatre was also a rich source of narrative, with *Ramaila* and the *raslila* as well as *yakshagana*, *bhavai*, *nautanki* and others. However, during the nineteenth century, the *Puranas* and epics were foundational to various new theatre traditions that developed in India, which had imported influences on local films. For example, the Telugu Surabhi Theatres took local traditions such as that of Andhra leather-puppet shows, and the *Harikatha* whose performers adapted the epics to the stage. The many companies that flourished in the area in the early twentieth century provided the Tamil and Telugu cinemas with their repertoire and their stars. In western India the Marathi Sangeet Natak, which blended traditional elements from Tanjore and (modern) Maharashtra with western-style painted backdrops, performed from a wide repertoire including Shakespeare and

Sanskrit plays set to music. Among the most famous groups were Bal Gandharva's Gandharva Natak Mandali and Govindrao Tembe's Shivraj Natak Mandali. Gandharva was an actor and Tembe as a music composer were key figures in Prabhat Films alongside other Sangeet Natak associates including V. Shantaram and Vishnupant Pagnis (see Chapter 2), while Baburao Painter, né Mestri, later of Maharashtra Film Company, gained his name as a professional painter of backdrops (see Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 205–6).

However, the most important form was the Parsi theatre,<sup>21</sup> named after the Zoroastrians, or Parsis, who founded it in the nineteenth century. Many groups in Bombay with names such as the Empress Victoria Natak Mandali and the Alfred Co. Groups soon became fixed in other cities such as Karachi, Hyderabad, Lucknow and Lahore.

Parsi theatre was important for cinema in numerous ways, in language, music, style, scenarios, stories, genres and personnel. Several Parsis were key figures in early cinema, notably the Madan brothers of Calcutta, Ardeshir Irani of Imperial Film, Sohrab Modi of Minerva Movietone and the Wadia brothers of Wadia Movietone. The Parsi theatre produced professional full-time writers, who published their plays. Some of the most famous of these became writers for cinema, including Aga Hashr Kashmiri (adapter of Shakespeare, and Arabian Nights stories as well as later writing mythological and devotionals such as New Theatre's *Chandidas*), Narayan Prasad Betaab (who later wrote for Ranjit Studio among others, where he was a great promoter of Hindi) and Radheshyam Kathavachak (another promoter of Hindi and a great writer of mythologicals, drawing on his family's background in the *Ramlila*) among others.

Genres of Indian cinema inherited from Parsi theatre included the historical, the romance, the Arabian Nights fantasy (see Chapter 3) and the mythological.<sup>22</sup> Cinema sometimes directly adapted popular plays such as *Raja Harishchandra* and Parsi and Iranian legends such as Rustom and Sohrab, and Shirin and Farhad.

The continuing popularity of the Parsi theatre set the style for silent films as well as for the talkies after 1931 (see Kapur 1993a, 1993b). Although the early cinema was 'silent' in the sense that it had no recorded sound, it often had a musical accompaniment in the style of the theatre and it adapted its sets, costumes, performance styles and gesture. It was not until the talkies that its mixture of dialogue and music became a hallmark of Indian popular cinema, but the influence of other performance styles cannot be discounted. Parsi theatre was originally in English, then Gujarati, the language of the Parsi community, but by the late nineteenth century it shifted to Urdu or Hindustani.<sup>23</sup>

The nineteenth century in India saw a proliferation of cheap, moveable images which clearly influenced moving pictures. Early Indian cinema drew

on the visual regime established in the nineteenth century in art, notably in Ravi Varma's painting, which was developed by the new technologies of chromolithography ('calendar art') and photography (see Pinney 1997, Rajadhyaksha 1993). These in turn showed developments from conventions of miniature painting via the Company School.<sup>24</sup> Phalke was a maker of chromolithographs as well as a photographer (see below) so was also familiar with these iconic images; it is not surprising therefore that the imagery of the mythological film is so closely enmeshed with these other visual forms, in particular the representations of 'calendar art', that is popular prints of gods and goddesses, produced in the new medium of chromolithography, which in turn had drawn on the new national art, both of which had earlier affected stage presentations (Pinney 2004).

Geeta Kapur argues that the films use iconicity and illusionism to compensate for descent of gods into realism (Kapur 2000). This iconicity is reinforced by the manifestation of premodern ways of looking in the cinema, notably that of *darshan* ('seeing').<sup>25</sup> The narration invites *darshan* by its use of tableaux, a feature that has long been seen in forms of worship such as the *jhanki* or tableau of the gods that the devotees view in the north Indian *raslila* and the *Ramlila*, and these mixed codes exist side by side in cinema as they had for decades in the other mass arts.

Christopher Pinney (2004: 193) argues for a corpoethics, a way of engaging the whole body through the eye. *Darshan* is dissimilar to elite western 'disembodied, unidirectional and disinterested vision, but not strikingly unlike a whole range of culturally diverse popular practices that stress mutuality and corporeality in spaces as varied as those of religious devotion and cinematic pleasure'. Pinney argues that in *darshan*, the exchange of looks, the eye is an organ of tactility that makes the connection. Linking the idea of seeing and being seen with Merleau-Ponty's 'double sensation' of touching and being touched, and picking up on Benjamin and Tausig, he argues that one should think of the corpoethics (sensory, corporeal aesthetics) of the encounter: a desire to fuse the image and the beholder with a focus on efficacy of the image, rather than of aesthetics, with a separation of the image and the beholder. He links *darshan* with popular visual practices elsewhere. This corpoethics is also suggestive for thinking about engagements with cinema and religious devotion in India and in the west, leading to a reconsideration of *darshan* as 'less than universal and more than local' (Vidal 2005).

Another way the mythological distances itself from the everyday is by its use of the special effect. While the religious image is held to be efficacious in films as it is elsewhere, cinematic special effects of beams of vision and of light moving from eye to eye emphasise the very nature of the religious image whether in the mythological film, such as *Jai Santoshi Maa*, or in moments in other films where images become efficacious, such as *Amrta*, *Akbar*, *Anthony* (see Chapter 4).

As Sean Cubitt has noted (2004: 53), the cinema drew on the use of special effects in theatre. He points out that the great master of the special effect, Méliès, had worked in the melodramatic theatres of Paris, which were 'majestically devoted to earthquakes, waterfalls, railway crashes, airborne apparitions, imaginary journeys, stampedes, battles, and mythical beasts. The apparatus of traps and projections, prestidigitation, wire acrobats, wrangling, massive and mobile sets, lighting and sound effects put it on a par with the 1990s music theater of Andrew Lloyd Webber'. Cubitt also observes that, 'As the technologisation of spectacle accelerated, its thematics moved bizarrely in the opposite direction: to folklore ... the gothic ... the melodramatic grotesque ... and the spectacle of the exotic (Cubitt 2004: 54). A similar history can be traced in Indian cinema, where the special effects of Parsi theatre and its various mechanisms for depicting flying gods and other astonishments (Kapur 1993a), were drawn on in cinema, where they were augmented by trick photography, particularly in the mythological film rather than in the films which dealt with contemporary issues such as the social and the stunt.

### Silent mythologicals: the makers and their films

Far from being some sort of 'backward' types, nearly all early film makers were educated in British institutions in India, whether art colleges (Phalke, Dhiren Ganguly of New Theatres) or universities (J.B.H. and Homi Wadia). Many of them were from elite families, notably the Wadia brothers whose ancestors were master shipbuilders to the British Navy, and most of the founders of New Theatres (B.N. Sircar's father was Advocate-General of West Bengal; Debaki Bose was the son of a lawyer; P.C. Barua was from a royal family, Nandy 2000) and Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani were from wealthy families and educated in London. Among the makers of mythologicals, several were from the traditional elite of Brahmins, such as D.G. Phalke and Vijay Bhatt. (Interestingly, the film makers at Prabhat were nearly all technicians and came from a wide range of social backgrounds.)

Fewer than twenty of India's silent films have survived to the present and these are mostly in the collection of the National Film Archive of India in Pune, Maharashtra.<sup>26</sup> For example, we do not have a single film made by the Maharashtra Film Company, several of whose personnel later formed Prabhat. Painter's company specialised in overtly nationalistic historical films according to all accounts, but also made a story from the *Mahabharata*, *Sairandhri* (1920), for which Tilak (the nationalist leader from (modern) Maharashtra) congratulated Painter. This story had been linked to depictions of Indians in servitude in chromolithographs and its resonances may well have been recognised by the audience as they were by Tilak (Dharap 1983: 82, Pinney 2004: 68–71). However, there are

some mythologicals including several by Phalke among this collection (see below) and also Phalke's *Tukaram* (1921, 498 feet)<sup>27</sup> and *Bhakta Prahlad* (1926, of which 501 feet survive)<sup>28</sup> and the Indo-German co-productions such as *The light of Asia* (1925, see below).<sup>29</sup>

One type of mythological was also made during the silent period, that was aimed less at a religious audience was about Buddhism (such as Phalke's *Buddhadev* in 1923), which was largely no longer practised in India, or was aimed at Europe and beyond, which used the special effects and the aesthetic of astonishment, but showed Indian culture and history. We know little about *Savitri* (1924), which Madan Theatres made in collaboration with Union Cinematografia Italiana of Rome and produced in Italy under supervision of Arrur Ambrosio. However, we do have copies of Himanshu Rai's collaborations with Emelka Studios in Munich, including *Prem Sanyas*/*The light of Asia* (1925), directed by Franz Osten, a team which is something of a precursor to Bombay Talkies (although they never made a mythological). It was edited and processed in Germany and given English titles. It ran for only two weeks in India but ran in London for ten months (Shah 1950:23). *The light of Asia* was much discussed in the ICC though largely as the testing ground for possible cooperation between Indian and overseas film makers.

*The light of Asia* was adapted by Niranjan Pal from Sir Edwin Arnold's epic poem *The light of Asia* or *the great renunciation* (*Mahabhinishkramana*), being *the life and teaching of Gautama*, first published in 1861. The film is largely in the style of the historical – with calendar art historical depictions. The film does not worry about anachronisms, so it shows many Muslim buildings as part of classical India's heritage (while Vijay Bhatt's mythological films show contemporary styles such as Art Deco). The film is keen to assert its high status, the opening credits telling us it was 'Shown by royal command at Windsor Castle, April 27 1926' and that they received great help from the Maharaja of Jaipur. The credits also tell us that the makers gave up their careers (a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, and a professor) for the sake of Indian dramatic art.

Osten's film shows spiritualism as the essence of India. The film begins with shots of western tourists in Bombay who then travel around India to Delhi, Benares, Gaya and then Bodh Gaya (the scene of the Buddha's enlightenment). There they meet an old man who tells them the story of Siddhartha Gautama from his birth to his leaving the palace, his wife and child, the *mahabhinishkramana* ('the great setting forth'), his moment of renunciation on his path to becoming the Buddha and the beginnings of his conversion. The scenes of the court were filmed in Rajasthan, which anachronistically passes for ancient India, largely because the Maharaja lent his elephants and collection of antique clothes to the production unit.

### Phalke: art and technology in the mythological

Dadasaheb Phalke (1870–1944) dominates the history of early Indian cinema, not least because the major body of work from that period which survives is his (cf. Rajadhyaksha 1994), but also, because of his writings in *Navyug*,<sup>30</sup> his interview with the ICC, and recent research,<sup>31</sup> we have much information about his training and background in the industrial arts of his time. The surviving parts of his films were assembled in 1956 for the Indian Motion Picture Producers Association (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980: 19).

Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, known as Dadasaheb Phalke ('respected grandfather Phalke'), was born in the sacred place Tryambakeshwar near Nasik in 1870.<sup>32</sup> His family intended him to follow his father as a Sanskrit scholar but when the latter moved to teach in Bombay, the son joined the J.J. School of Arts then went to study at Kalabhavan, Baroda, where he first became interested in photography. He trained as an amateur magician, then after working as a photographer, a scene-painter and draughtsman, he worked in Ravi Varma's Lonavala Press from 1901 to 1911, which was after Ravi Varma had sold up, the firm now being run by a German, Schleicher. Phalke then managed his own business in Bombay, namely Phalke's Engraving and Printing Works, Dadar. He went to Germany in 1909 and on his return renamed his company the Lakshmi Art Printing Works setting in new premises in Byculla. One of the few presses to do colour printing, they produced a series of illustrated booklets, the *Suvarnamala*, for major festivals (Pinney 2004: 72).

Already a photographer, magician and lithographer, Phalke decided to become involved in films after seeing *The life and passion of Christ* in 1910.<sup>33</sup> He made some short films, then in 1912 went to London to buy film-making equipment and met the editor of *Bioscope* and Cecil Hepworth. Film making was very much a one-man effort as Phalke told the ICC that he had to direct, write, photograph, print and edit. Phalke used complex editing and was clearly a master of special effects; however, his films are driven by narrative as much as by spectacle.<sup>34</sup>

*Raja Harischandra* was premiered on 3 May 1913 at the Coronation Cinema, Bombay, where it ran for twenty-three days, six times the usual run of films (Dharap 1985: 38). Phalke's first version of the film has disappeared but he remade it in 1917 and 1,475 feet of this later version have survived.<sup>35</sup> This is a story transmitted from ancient Vedic *Brahmanas*, through the *Mahabharata* and various *Puranas*. It was a staple of the Parsi theatre, its most famous version being that performed by the Victoria Theatre Group, although Bharatendu wrote a version in Hindi, *Sarya Harischandra* (1885). The story was also the subject of a painting by Ravi Varma and then a popular chromolithograph of the Calcutta Art Studio (Pinney 2004: 72). King Harischandra goes on a hunting expedition, when

he finds that the sage Vishwamitra has trapped the three powers (Trishakti) and Harischandra releases them. The sage is angered and the king appeases him by giving him the kingdom. Harischandra, Queen Taramati and the prince go into exile. The son dies and Queen Taramati is accused of his murder. Shiva appears to save the situation and the family are restored to the throne.

Even though men performed women's roles in many forms of theatre, Phalke felt that film with closer shots needed women to act. However, he was famously unable to get any women to perform in his film, despite the mythological theme. He even placed an advertisement and approached prostitutes but no one was willing to appear. In the end he took an effeminate waiter, Anna Salunke, to play Queen Taramati (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980: 13–14). Salunke also acted in Phalke's *Lanka dahan*, where he played hero (Rama) and heroine (Sita).

Phalke moved to Nasik and soon made his second mythological, *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1914), soon followed by *Savitri Satyavan* (1914), neither of which has survived. *Mohini Bhasmasur* is noteworthy for having the first woman to act in Indian cinema. Kamalabai Gokhale, née Kamat (1900–97), was an actor on the Marathi stage, often appearing along with her mother, Durgabai. She played Mohini when she was thirteen then returned to the stage, paradoxically, often acting in men's roles.<sup>36</sup>

The success of these films allowed Phalke to buy more machinery but his plans of showing his films abroad were held up because of the war. Facing problems with the freeze on imports, Phalke kept the studio open on a shoestring and made many shorts – comedies, cartoons, topical and educational shorts, and a film of himself performing magic tricks. After further setbacks, Phalke made new versions of *Raja Harischandra* (this is the version of which some has survived, see above) and *Lanka dahan* (*Lanka aflame*, 1917), the story of Hanuman setting fire to Lanka with his tail. Of the latter, 501 feet have survived<sup>37</sup> showing Sita in captivity and scenes with Hanuman and Ravana. This was Phalke's most popular film, and it met with huge success. This story from the *Ramayana* was a popular theme even before Phalke for chromolithography<sup>38</sup> and Hanuman films have continued to be some of the most popular mythologicals.

Other mythologicals of Phalke's which have survived are *Shree Krishna Janma* (*The birth of Shri Krishna*, 1918), which shows well-known episodes from Krishna's childhood. In the 576 feet that remain<sup>39</sup> is the sequence where Krishna rises from the River Yamuna on the demon snake Kaliya with the famous shot framed by his devotees. Other sequences included Krishna with his mother, Yashoda, in which she sees him as god, and also a sequence where Krishna's wicked uncle, King Kamsa, imagines his head being cut off (and the wonderful throat rubbing he does afterwards). The final title-card reads, 'May this humble offering be accepted by the Lord.'



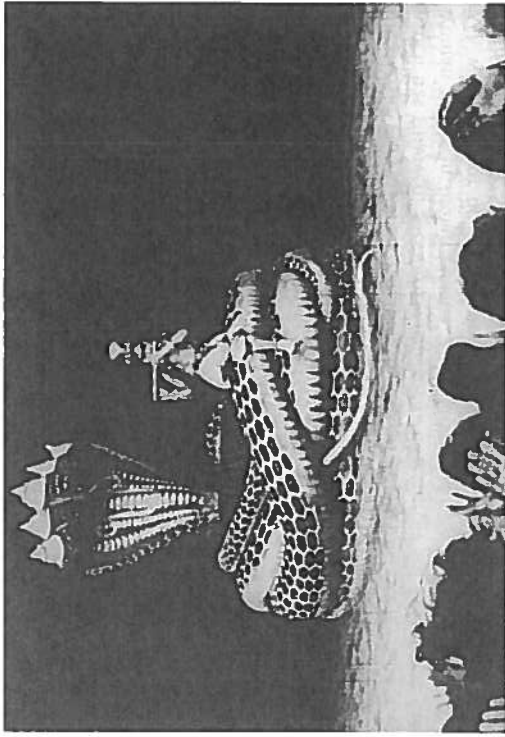


Figure 1.2 *Shree Krishna Janma* (1918, dir. D.G. Phalke). Krishna's devotees take his *darshan* within the frame as he rises from the River Yamuna (formerly named Jumna).

Of Phalke's *Kaliya Mardan* (1919), 4441 feet<sup>40</sup> remain, including Mandakini Phalke, who had also played Krishna in *Shree Krishna Janma*, showing various expressions of her acting. The surviving episodes show his pranks as a child – stealing butter and tying a man's beard to his wife's hair, and the underwater fight with Kaliya, after which Krishna emerges triumphant.

Phalke wrote some articles about film making for *Naryug* (see Rajadhyaksha 1993) and set up his studio in Nasik on a more secure footing. About 100 people worked there (ICC III: 875), all family and quasi-family. However, he retired at this point, with only occasional film making thereafter. In the end he had made 100 feature films and thirty shorts (Dharap 1985: 46).

Although Phalke filmed his first *Raja Harishchandra* in Bombay, when there were still wooded hills in Tardeo, he then moved to Nasik where he made all his later films. There were sacred places in Nasik and it was cheaper to run his company there, but also, even though when I visited (2003) Nasik was very industrialised, the beauty of the older city was still clear. Cubitt notes that Phalke's films were shot on location – in our everyday space, not in studios (2004: 57). However, space in Tryambakeshwar and Nasik is not everyday but divine space. The former is sacred,

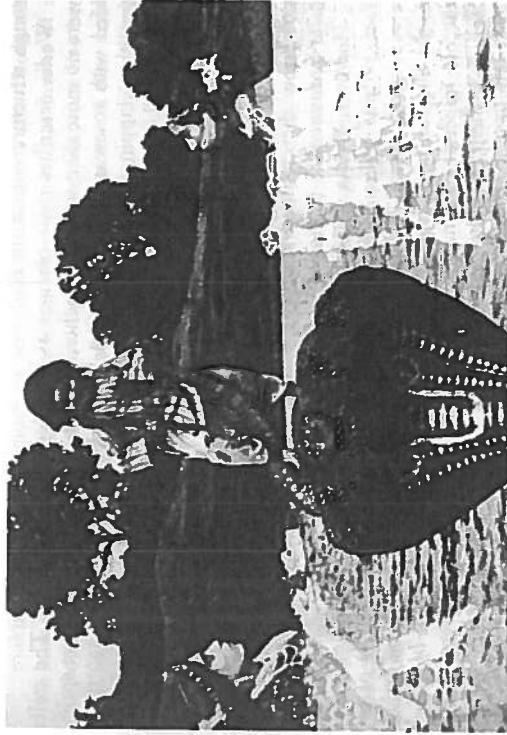


Figure 1.3 *Kaliya Mardan* (1919, dir. D.G. Phalke). Phalke's use of special effects to show that the divine is dramatic can be seen in this image of Krishna being worshipped as he rises from the Yamuna.

marked by one of the twelve Jyotirlingas (forms marking the sacred places) of Shiva and the source of the River Godavari. Nasik contains Panchavati, where Rama, Sita and Lakshman lived during their exile in the forest. However, the space inbetween these two was the British military base of Deolali, a constant reminder of the colonial presence. This space was therefore marked as a place of myth, of colonialism and of the nationalist, *swadeshi* (the movement adopted by the Indian National Congress to boycott foreign goods) vision of Phalke himself.<sup>41</sup>

### The audience

Before we can examine how the audience viewed these religious films, we need to place them in the wider context of film viewing during the silent period. One of the very few accounts we have is by J.B.H. Wadia (1977), who writes about cinema going in his memoirs. In Chapter 1, he describes how he and his school friends went to the cinemas every Saturday and Sunday, seeing around four or five films over the weekend. Their staples were Hollywood serials, westerns and slapstick comedies. They could not afford trams so they walked to cinemas in the periphery of Fort, Opera House and Charni Road Junction. Their cinemas ranged from the upmarket



Excelsior Theatre to Lohar Chawl where the Alexandra Cinema was a rough structure with a tin roof.

Wadia describes these cinemas as chaotic and overcrowded. The stalls were no more than wooden benches, while the balcony viewers were sprinkled with rosewater. Once the film began there was no silence, as there was the 'clapping, whistling and shouting of the excited audience in the cinema hall itself', and when the hero appeared, they shouted 'Dey dey - maar saaley ko!' ('Go on, hit the bastard!'). There were intertitles for films, but all in English. Wadia writes: 'Those few fortunate ones who had a smattering of the language would read aloud and translate them in a Babel of their respective vernaculars for the benefit of those who did not know the common language of the British Empire.' Meanwhile the *pista-badamwallas* (nut-sellers) shouted out their goods during the film.

However, Wadia saw Indian films infrequently because, as an educated Parsi, 'I was still out of tune, more or less, with the Hindu way of life - in fact the overall Indian way of life' (1977: 26). He found the Indian social film full of male chauvinist ideology, citing Madan's *Pati bhakti* at the old Imperial Cinema. 'Patience Cooper (Jewish) was the heroine and Signora Minelli was other woman. Patience Cooper was the "adarsh abla", ideal Hindu wife. Cooper's words in subtitles to the effect "Please don't. He is my pati dev [husband like a god]". "The bathos of the melodramatic sequence was beyond my endurance'. However, he enjoyed Baburao Painter's film, saying, 'No anthology of the Indian film can be called complete if it did not include "Savkari Pash"' (Wadia 1997: 29).

As the other ICC interviewees, Wadia describes the audiences as being divided by class, with cinemas catering to specific audiences. For example, the Super Cinema, Charni Road Junction, owned by Seth Ruttansha Dorabji aka Bawaji and his brother Seth Rustomji (the Wellington brothers), even gave rosebuds to patrons. Bawaji wore a respectable Parsi long coat, black necktie and Parsi *paghri* (headress). Patrons would always come to his films, even Parsis who were mostly not interested in film. Chinese men and women from the Red Light District at Playhouse and its unique White Lane also attended.

J.B.H. Wadia notes the aversion of the intelligentsia to films (1977: 75), and in particular the stunt films, 'derided at by clever film critics and discerning cinegoers' (1977: 78). Yet although he was from the elite Wadia family and highly educated, Wadia himself made mostly stunt films, while his brother Horni later made mythologicals (see below), thus going against the class and educational divides which seem to be so widely accepted:

Money makes the mare go and I jumped on the obliging steed joyously and kept galloping for some years. In the process thereof I had forsworn whatever dreams I had secretly nurtured to reach 'the cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces' in the realms of Socials and Musicals.

Lest I be misunderstood let me make it clear that I have enjoyed making stunt films as much as Socials, Mythologicals etc. Those who look down upon the Stunt film forget that it, too, has merits of its own. Its special attribute of providing Thrill and Suspense has been unhesitatingly appropriated by all types of film makers. A film maker worth his salt will not make a film if his heart is not in it. (Wadia 1977, Part 2, 1993-41: 2)

In the absence of other such eyewitness accounts we have to use other materials to retrieve some idea of what the audiences thought of early cinema. Film reviewing starts late (the *Times of India* begins reviewing films only with the coming of sound in the 1930s), the early papers and film magazines gave mostly press releases about the films as they feared critical reviews would lose them valuable advertising revenue. There are some advertisements and features about the industry but I have found few dating back to the silent period. For this period, the most valuable source is the ICC Report (RICC) and the accompanying Evidences (ICC I-V).

The audiences for the different genres were quite clearly segmented.<sup>42</sup> The cinemas each catered for specific audiences and showed different types of films with this intention. Since people largely lived in areas according to their race (European or Indian) and class, these divisions were fairly straightforward. For example, in Bombay the Fort area had cinemas for Europeans and educated Indians that show mostly foreign films; middle-class Indians go to cinemas in the Grant Road area while the lower-class audience goes to the cinemas in the mill areas.

The audience was also divided by religious group: 'Only Hindu audiences appreciate Indian pictures. Parsis, Muhammadans and Europeans and Anglo-Indians like foreign pictures' (ICC I: 123). Within these groups, Hindus preferred mythologicals while Muslims liked love and romance from Muslim and Persian sources and historicals about Muslim rulers (ICC I: 561). However, even a religious film attracted a wider audience for other reasons. Dorabji, the owner of the Wellington, notes (ICC I: 357) that in a film that showed the Exodus from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea was very popular with the audience for many days, although eventually even its popularity wore off.

Gender was another divide as, although male and female Parsis went together to see mostly foreign films, fewer Muslims went to the cinema and among them, only men; while among Hindus, mostly men attended (ICC I: 560). Some see the audience as being divided by education, with the English-educated going to cinemas that show foreign films; whereas most of the educated classes, and some Europeans and Parsis, did not like to see a Hindu film relating to mythology as they preferred history and social dramas (ICC I: 17). The working classes preferred stunts,

romance and comedy; while the 'illiterates' preferred mythologicals and folklore romances (ICC I: 24).

There were also important regional differences in taste, beyond the question of the language of intertitles, and styles of clothing. It was often mentioned that the mythological was more popular in Madras (ICC I: 865), whereas historicals, especially those which were about the Great Maratha, Shivaji, were much more popular in Bombay, where the mythological was only really popular at festival times (ICC I: 377). In the north, Muslims, who were known to object to depictions of their own prophets, demonstrated against the film *The moon of Israel* even though the film did not show Muslims. Films showing the Buddha in human form were often banned in Buddhist parts of South Asia, so *The light of Asia* was banned in Ceylon and also the Malay states. Some Hindus objected to scenes showing Krishna and the Gopis as these were felt to be inappropriate to modern sensibilities and should not be shown to the uneducated. Yet the summary in the Report (RICC: 34) says: 'These mythological films are less affected by provincial differences than the social dramas; they have an especial appeal for the uneducated people, and, if they are of good quality, they appeal to the deep-rooted religious instincts of all classes.'

There was little interest in Indian cinema from the elite (European and educated Indian) audiences, and Indian films were not reviewed in the English-language newspapers. However, Phalke must have thought he might attract some of the elite to his films for which he had a high rate of admission, by placing an advert for *Raja Harischandra* in the *Bombay Chronicle*, 3 May, 1913.<sup>43</sup> However, he thought it was still restricted as he says the film is 'Sure to appeal to our Hindu patrons.' It was screened at the Coronation Cinematograph and Variety Hall, Sandhurst Road, as part of a variety programme with 'Miss Irene Delmar, in a duet and dance; the McClements, Comical sketch and Alexandroff, the wonderful foot-juggler.' This does not suggest the overall effect of the screening was a pious occasion but part of a broader programme of entertainment.

We know that Phalke's films were phenomenally successful in India as this was reported in the Evidences (ICC III: 280, ICC I: 356) and that they were shown in Burma, Singapore and East Africa (ICC II: 874). As we saw above, *Raja Harischandra* ran for a record twenty-three days, while *Lanka dahan* was Phalke's most successful film. It was screened at West End Cinema, Girgaum, Bombay, where it was shown every hour from 7 a.m. to midnight to allow the crowds to see it and it collected Rs 32,000 in the first ten days (Dharap 1985: 38). There were similar reactions in Poona, where the crowd nearly broke down the doors, while in Madras the takings had to be carried in a bullock cart with police protection (Dharap 1985: 43).

J.B.H. Wadia writes in his memoir:

[*Lanka dahan*] was tagged to an American feature film at the old West End Cinema of Seth Rustomji Dorabji Wellington situated just behind the Girgaum Police Court. The roadside and the compound of the cinema used to be choked with bullock carts in which devoted people from small towns and villages nearby – Bombay came to have a 'darshan' of their beloved gods, Shree Ram and Shree Hanuman.

As a westernized Parsee youngster I had a hearty laugh at the sight of a muscular Seeta played by a male artiste (Salunke) as also the all-powerful tail of Shree Hanuman made of rope. But I was stunned by the spectacular burning of Lanka and the thrilling flight of Ram Bhakt in the sky with every shot of the divine flier becoming progressively smaller and smaller to heighten the effect of the sequence. (Wadia 1977: 25)

Phalke's films were clearly seen as both part of a religious experience and a major attraction. His genius in special effects and his skill at storytelling were enough to attract non-religious viewers, who could also enjoy the awe and wonder of these skills and of seeing the chromolithographs move and come to life. Yet Phalke never allows these attractions to distract from the strong narrative line of his films, in which heroes and gods come alive on the screen. His films, which he called nationalistic (*swadeshi*), and his use of special effects created a new form of modernity around religion, which reached an enormous audience and he is rightly called 'the father of Indian cinema'.

### The mythological after the silent film

It is said that the coming of sound led to a rapid decline in the number of mythologicals, but a reading of the statistics (Gokarn n.d.: 83) shows that the number of religious films does not change but that the number of other genres made increases. In the silent period, mythologicals were around 20 per cent of the silents made from 1913–34 (Dharap 1983: 80). They were around 70 per cent until 1923 when they fell to around 15 per cent, rising towards the end of the silent period to 40 per cent total output in 1931–3 (Dharap 1983: 80), falling to 22 per cent in 1935 and then down to 10 per cent over the next four decades, to 3–9 per cent in the 1970s (Gokarn n.d.: 82).

The silent films had found different audiences for different films (see above), with the mythological being more popular in the south than elsewhere. However, apart from the Sanskrit *smarta* deities (Vishnu-Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Ganesh and so on), many deities in India can be said to be localised, so Skanda is not worshipped much in the north but, called

Murugan, he is one of the most popular deities in the south. Some deities had a more local following but have now spread, for example, Lord Venkateshwara of Tirupati in Andhra now has many devotees in the north.

Language was already an issue which divided audiences, even in the silent films by the choice of language for the intertitles, something much discussed in the ICC. Once the talkies begin, this makes the divide all the clearer as a Tamil film is not going to be a hit in the north unless it is dubbed. Even for an audience used to silent films and knowing the stories of the mythologicals, the style of music, of costume and so on always has marked regions and there has been little interest in films about other regions.<sup>44</sup> When Prabhat made bilingual films (see below), the late Mr A.V. Damle (son of one of the founders, V.G. Damle) told me that they used to change costumes for Hindi versions to look more north Indian. Bombay Talkies (whose predecessors made *The light of Asia*) had many Bengali personnel (Himanshu Rai, Devika Rani and later others) and created the first generic north Indian look, with little regional identity.

Nearly all the early talkies with a regional flavour, apart from the Hindi films, were mythologicals, devotionals or historicals. Telugu had *Bhakta Prabhad*, Tamil *Kalidas*, Marathi *Shyamsundar*, and Gujratati *Narsi Mehta*. The film language of Hindi/Urdu is largely taken from the Parsi theatre, the mythologicals showing a striking use of Sanskritic Hindi, while avoiding Persian/Urdu. (It is perhaps ironic that this style of Hindi that continues to be used by later mythologicals, which are mostly B-movies, is that promoted by the government and its official media such as Doordarshan – state television – and AIR – All India Radio, state radio.) Many later social films mock this style of speaking, such as *Chupke chupke* (1975, dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee).

The makers of these talkies mostly made all genres, rather than specialising in the mythological. Shantaram directed several mythologicals and devotionals at Prabhat before concentrating on social films. Some makers found that the communalism that was being mobilised by politicians in the 1930s made it hard for non-Hindus to make mythologicals, although several of the film makers (Wadia, Fattelal) and actors (Shahu Modak, Gohar) were non-Hindus. Even though Parsis were not involved in the communal problems, J.B.H. Wadia ran into trouble with his only mythological, the 1934 film, *Vaman avatar*. He writes:

In the first two decades of the Talkie Era, producers were often harassed by self styled protagonists of Hindu and Muslim culture. They had raised themselves to the stature of super-censors but more often than not it was just blackmail . . . My first two talkies happened to be set in the backdrop of ancient Muslim history. Some orthodox Hindus in their anxiety to defend their ancient culture condemned me

as a Parsee who was not only pro-Muslim overtly but also pro-Pakistani covertly. Little did they know that I was a freedom fighter and selected by the Indian National Congress as one of the Congress Dictators during the second Civil Disobedience Movement . . . To prove my non-alignment I chose to make a Mythological as my third film. The ever-resourceful Joseph David had a story on Vaman Avatar in his handwritten books . . . But when the film was released in Super Cinema of Seth Ruttonsha Dorabji Wellington, affectionately known as 'Bawaji' I was simply flabbergasted to find opposition to my effort from some orthodox Hindus themselves.

The scripted Bali had humiliated Indra and conquered Swarga by performing marathon yagnas. With the help of his great Guru Sukracharya he had become the lord of Trilok – Swarga, Mrityu and Pataal. He has been generally depicted as an evil entity, say, like Ravan. However, Dada and I had portrayed him as a virtuous Danava and not as an asura. Dada suggested we go and see the High Priest of the Bhuleshwar temple. He wouldn't see the film . . . so I told the story. [He approved.]

Delhi – UP circuit . . . editor of Hindu newspaper started a virulent campaign against the film. [Vaman Avatar of Vishnu shouldn't be played by Parsee . . . needed [someone] not only Hindu but Brahmin.] (Wadia n.d.)

The first Marathi talkie, *Shyamsundar* (1932, dir. Bhalji Pendharkar) was probably such a novelty that it crossed linguistic and religious boundaries in Bombay. A review says, 'The singing of Balgandharva and Master Modak drives everyone – Hindu, Parsi, Muslim – crazy – whether they half understand Marathi or not.'<sup>45</sup>

Prabhat's early productions were mostly bilingual (Hindi and Marathi) as were those of New Theatres (Hindi and Bengali). Their first talkie was a version of the story of Harischandra, *Ayodhyache raja/Ayodhya ka raja* (1932, dir. V. Shantaram). Although this film is important as it is the oldest surviving talkie, it is rather dull, but it has all the technical qualities of a Prabhat film, with spectacles of processions of elephants, dances, an ornate palace and court, and music by Govindrao Tembe. Alongside Tembe and Durga Khote are Baburao Pendharkar and his stepbrother Master Vinayak, both of whom had long careers in Shantaram's films.

The second Prabhat talkie to come out that year, also directed by Shantaram, was the much more striking *Maya Machchindra*, again in Hindi and Marathi. This film, though a mythological, is set in the somewhat more remote (and somewhat confusing to this viewer) world of Nath yogis, the sect of which Shiva himself was the first yogi, Adinath, the second being Macchindrinath. Macchindrinath shows his disciple, Gotakhnath, that the world is *maya* (approximately 'illusion'), which

allows for the showing of miracles such as beheading and restoration of the head. Far more spectacular are the wonderful sets and costumes of Fattalal showing this world of women who hate men. A spectacular set shows the queen in a room with a giant lion's head, whose jaws open to reveal a throne, while the floor has tigerskins and a real leopard wanders around in a most alarming manner. It is shot with a static camera, nearly all full shot, with no close-up or shot-reaction cuts, giving the film a very theatrical feel. The film seems to have little of the religious to it, being much more about spectacle than piety.

One review mentions that the Urdu diction is not very good,<sup>46</sup> while an advert in Gujarati (not one of the languages of the film) proclaims, '*Prabhat sinetomi sarvottam paurnanik bolti philm: Maya Macchindra (Marathi). Uttam sangit! Uttam sanuaad! Uttam abhinay!*' ('Prabhat Cinetones' ultimate religious talkie: *Maya Macchindra* (Marathi). Best music! Best dialogue! Best acting!'<sup>47</sup>)

Shantaram then directed another Hindi/Marathi film, *Amritmanthan* (1934), based on a Marathi novel by Narayan Hari Apte (1889-1971).<sup>48</sup> Although set in mythological times, the film has the political feel that was to become Shantaram's hallmark. Again it uses spectacle to great effect, once in the extreme close-up of the priest's eye and in the showing of the *amritmanthan* (the mythological story of the gods' churning of the ocean to extract nectar), where the special effects show a huge snake, Shesha, who appears to be using Mt Meru as the churning pole.<sup>49</sup> It was a huge hit, largely for the technical qualities of Prabhat that are by now clearly established.

#### THE QUESTION WHY?

HOW is it that Amrit Manthan which is now running for the 9th week, note that this is the 9th week the Krishna Talkies is drawing those very crowded houses which are generally expected at the first or at the most the second week of any good picture; as also the SECOND question WHY is that Prabhat's Indian Talkie Picture Amrit Manthan is being so enthusiastically patronised by that HIGH CLASS COSMOPOLITAN PUBLIC OF BOMBAY who attend only the English picture houses. Now these are the answers. (1) Prabhat's Amrit Manthan is drawing even after eight weeks run crowded houses as if it were just released because it is a picture that is SUPERBLY PRODUCED, DIRECTED AND ACTED. No wonder then that it has even after eight weeks continuous run kept up its popularity which is not at all diminishing even when the number of weeks is increasing with the flow of time. (2) The convincing reply to the question why is already given by such notables as - SIR AKBAR HYDARI, SIR PHIROZE SETHNA, SIR CHUNILAL MEHTA, and many others like them. And we have all proclaimed that AM is a very very NICE

picture which can safely be compared to any good western one. THEN WHAT WONDER is it that even with increase in weeks, the popularity of AM is also on the increase? Miss not therefore to see this super epic musical, Amrit Manthan, with the divinely delicious Shanta Apte, and be convinced yourself.<sup>50</sup>

And:

#### IN THE STUDIOS - ON THE SCREEN

Amrit Manthan at the Krishna: The Western India Theatres Limited are proud to announce that Prabhat's Amrit Manthan has now reached the highest record figure, 15 weeks of continuous run, reached by any picture (foreign or even Indian) released in Bombay during the last two years on 1933 and 1934.<sup>51</sup>

And:

#### IN THE STUDIOS - ON THE SCREEN

Amrit Manthan, 16th week . . . A visit to the Krishna shows that Hindus, Parsis, Mahomedans, Jews, Christians and even Europeans make a liberal rush to see Amrit Manthan.<sup>52</sup>

An advertisement for *Amritmanthan* says:

Amrit Manthan has been appreciated not only in India but all over the world. The Illustrated London News - 'India is on the way to becoming a serious competitor in the film-producing world, to judge by these interesting photographs taken in the new establishment of Prabhat Cinetone at Prabhatnagar, Poona, near Bombay . . . claimed to be the largest and the only self-contained studio in India, with high reputation both among Indians and Europeans. As our illustrations show, the studio is well equipped with modern technical apparatus while the skill of the Indian artist and craftsman shows to great advantage in the sculptural and architectural work. The examples illustrated and the big set on the full page opposite, belong to a new picture on the grand scale entitled Amrit Manthan. It is a drama of the Vedic period.'<sup>53</sup>

The film had a silver jubilee (25-week run) and Prabhat's next film, also directed by Shantaram, *Chandrasena* (Hindi, Marathi and Tamil), an episode from the *Ramayana*, full of special effects, profited from this.

IN THE STUDIOS - ON THE SCREEN:

Chandra Sena at the Minerva: Prabhat's new mythological picture, Chandra Sena, which was released at the Minerva Talkies Friday last

has been as was anticipated, a tremendous success. It is said that the box-office collections of the opening night have broken all records of any Indian or foreign picture so far released in Bombay. The Minerva has been drawing capacity houses at each show for the last eight days. From the popularity which the picture has achieved in its first week it may be safely predicted that it will enjoy a run of several weeks like Amrit Manthan. Nailini Turkhad does justice to her role as Chandra Sena. As the abducted maiden she is irresistible and sings songs that delight the audience . . . a prominent feature of Chandra Sena is the novel type of orchestral music which serves as a delightful background. Another outstanding feature is the wonderful setting of *patal lok*.<sup>54</sup>

Other films seemed to be of more interest for their religious context and attracted interest from various Hindu leaders.

#### BOMBAY FILM DIARY: RADHIKA AT PATHÉ.

Leaders of the Hindu community, like Dr P. Varadarajulu Naidu, general secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha, Swami Sambudhananda of the Sri Ramkrishna Ashram, Mr N.V. Tampi, president of the theosophical society, Bombay, have given Radhika their unanimous opinion that it is a picture of a high order and higher ideals that every Hindu man as well as woman should make it a point to see. The president of the theosophical society remarks that the picture shows once again that to the truly pure in heart, no danger can ensue and that our surest and safest refuge in weal and woe is God. Swami Sambudhananda remarked that the central theme of the picture is the immortal teaching of Lord Krishna.<sup>55</sup>

### Mythologicals as Indian heritage

One of the great makers of the mythologicals was Vijay Bhatt (1907–93)<sup>56</sup> who made films in Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati. He made Gujarati plays and stories into silent films, working with many companies. Trained by Ardeshir Irani of Imperial, he and his elder brother, Shankar Bhatt, the writer of Gujarati plays and later screenplays, founded their own silent film company, Royal Film Company. Vijay worked as a director with Kadar Studios then founded Prakash Pictures, later Prakash Studio (1933–71), in which Nanabhai Bhatt also worked. Prakash's motto was taken from Cardinal Newman: 'Lead kindly light', and they made around sixty-four films. They discovered many stars, including Jayant (Zakaria Khan, father of Amjad), Meena Kumari and the music director, Naushad. Prakash also made action films,<sup>57</sup> fantasies and an occasional social (*Pooritima*, dir. Balwant Bhatt, 1938, by Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai, the famous Gujarati writer. *Harivali aur raasta*, 1962), before moving into

devotionals (see Chapter 2), and mythologicals. Bhatt's interest in Indian historical culture and history were seen in his films such as *Vikramaditya* (1945) for the two-thousandth anniversary of the Vikram Samvat (the major Indian calendar), starring Prithviraj Kapoor as the monarch who saved the nation. He made celebrated films about Indian musical culture, including *Bajju Bawra* (1952) and *Goonj utthi shehnai* (1959).

Two of Vijay Bhatt's films were mythologicals based on the *Ramayana*. The first was *Bharat Milap* (Hindi)/*Bharat Bhet* (Marathi) (1942), with titles and intertitles in Devanagari (Hindi and Marathi), English and Urdu. Much research went into the film, and the credits mention sources as both Maharshi Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Goswami Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*.

Rama's brother, Prince Bharata (played by Shahu Modak), is celebrating his birthday in Ayodhya and an *aarti* (worship with lights) is performed. Rama (Prem Adib), Sita (Shobhana Samarth) and Lakshmana come to wish him a happy birthday. Rama's mother, Queen Kaushalya, gives him an image of Rama with which Bharata is thrilled. Queen Kaikeyi, Bharata's mother, is shown with King Dasharatha. Manthana, the wicked servant, encourages Queen Kaikeyi to be envious of the king's love for Rama, even though Bharata is such a devotee of Rama that the latter's image appears on his chest.

In a grand song sequence, a group sings, '*Arya Raam Raajya*' ('Rama's rule has come'; 'Ram Rajya' was a term used by Gandhi for India restored to rightful rule) and lights spell out '*Arya Raamraajya tyauhaar*' ('The festival of Rama's rule has come').

Queen Kaikeyi asks King Dasharatha for a boon. He agrees and she asks him to exile Rama for fourteen years. The crowd rebels against the king, but Rama says he has to follow his father's order and leave; he takes his leave of Ayodhya with sadness, going into the forest with Sita and Lakshman.

The great emotional moment of the film is the reunion of the brothers. Bharata is thinking about suicide, when Rama appears and saves him. Bharata returns to the kingdom where he puts Rama's shoes on a throne, and images of Sita and Rama appear on them. After the exile is over, Rama, Sita and Lakshman return with Hanuman leading. The three queens welcome them back while everyone sings, '*Raam Raam Raja Ram*' ('King Ram').

This is not a film with many miracles nor with swashbuckling heroism, but it is about the brothers' love for each other and the virtues of patience, endurance, forgiveness and loyalty. The emotion is very well handled and the image of gentle, righteous Rama is projected, rather than the angry warrior we have seen in recent years. The film was a huge success:

THIRD WEEK OF BHARAT MILAP – FILM BASED ON EPIC RAMAYANA PROVES IMMENSELY POPULAR.

Prakash's Bharat Milap that has taken Bombay cinegoers by storm now makes its triumphant entry into third week at Majestic. It is a gorgeous

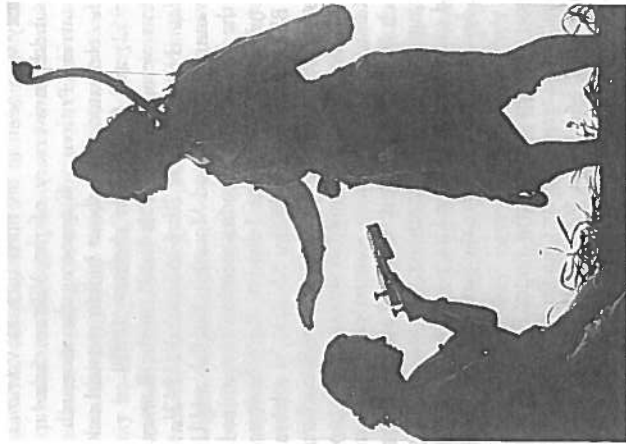


Figure 1.4 *Bharat Milap* (1942, dir. Vijay Bhatt). Bharata takes Rama's sandals to keep on the throne to show he is king in absentia.

picture full of architectural grandeur and costumes of the days of the Epic Ramayana, as well as scenes depicting deepest love and fiercest jealousy. The picture depicts how Shree Ramchandra in the idol of Ayodhya and the beloved son of Raja Dasaratha, declining the offer of sovereignty willingly embraced banishment in the wilds for fourteen long years to honour his father's words to one of the junior queens. It shows also how Ramchandra's brother Bharata refuses the gift of throne out of his love and respect for Ramchandra and the traditions of the royal house of Raghu. The picture depicts also the graceful and gracious Seeta suffering ungrudgingly with her lord as a dutiful Hindu woman who finds joy in the pleasures of her husband, grief in his sorrows and unbounded sympathy in his predicaments, thus proving that for her, there is none greater than her lord. *Bharat Milap* has also a Marathi version entitled *Bharat Bhet*. The picture, which is a product of devoted study and strenuous labours, is directed by Vijay Bhatt who has carved a niche for himself in film-history.

[Advertisement] Prakash Pictures Divine Message to Humanity, Bharat Milap. A golden page from great epic Ramayana, a picture of ancient art and culture, a gorgeous picture that recaptures the glory of ancient days on screen, see at Majestic.<sup>58</sup>

It was premiered by Dr Radhakrishnan at the Majestic Cinema, who enjoyed the film. The guest of honour at the Calcutta premier was a minister, Dr B.C. Roy. The film had silver jubilees all over the country, attended by Dr K.M. Munshi and other dignitaries.

#### CRIPPS ASKED TO SEE BHARAT MILAP.

The last and current weeks have been particularly good for Bharat Milap in all the 30 stations it has been released. Hindus in North and South India have been celebrating the Jayantis of Ramchandra and Shri Hanuman and none who could have missed seeing the life of Ramchandra on the screen at Majestic Cinema in Bombay, all the shows have been crowded. Mr Bhadrakumar Yajnik, Publicity Officer of Prakash Pictures, who has produced BM has done well to invite Sir Stafford Cripps to find a little time to see this picture in Delhi at Moti Cinema, reminding him that it breathes the true spirit of Indian culture and telling him that such eminent Hindus as Dr Radhakrishnan, N.C. Kelkar and K.M. Munshi have liked the film very much.<sup>59</sup>

Vijay Bhatt's next film, *Ram Rajya* (1943), was also a Hindi-Marathi bilingual. It takes up the story of *Ramayana* after the return from Lanka. Rama (Prem Adib) and Sita (Shobhana Samarth) are back on the throne but Rama hears a washerwoman ask how Rama knows Sita was faithful to him in Lanka. Rama sends her to Valmiki's ashram in the forest, where she gives birth to Luva and Kusha. Rama performs the vedic *ashwamedha* sacrifice, where a king sets a horse loose to wander for a year and, unless anyone challenges it, the land is the king's. Luva and Kusha stop the horse and Rama has to fight them. This is an episode from the *Ramayana* that some people nowadays find hard to digest but one that has particular resonances for women who have been brought under suspicion, even though they are innocent of any wrong-doing.

*Picturpost* mentions it ran for eighty-eight weeks, the longest in history,<sup>60</sup> it later ran in some cinemas for over 100 weeks. Vijay Bhatt was honoured by politicians and others, but the greatest honour this film received was that it was the only film that Gandhi ever saw. Gandhi's low opinion of cinema was recorded in the ICC:

Even if I was so minded, I should be unfit to answer your question-naire, as I have never been to a cinema. But even to an outsider, the evil that it has done and is doing is patent. The good, if it has done any at all, remains to be proved.<sup>61</sup>



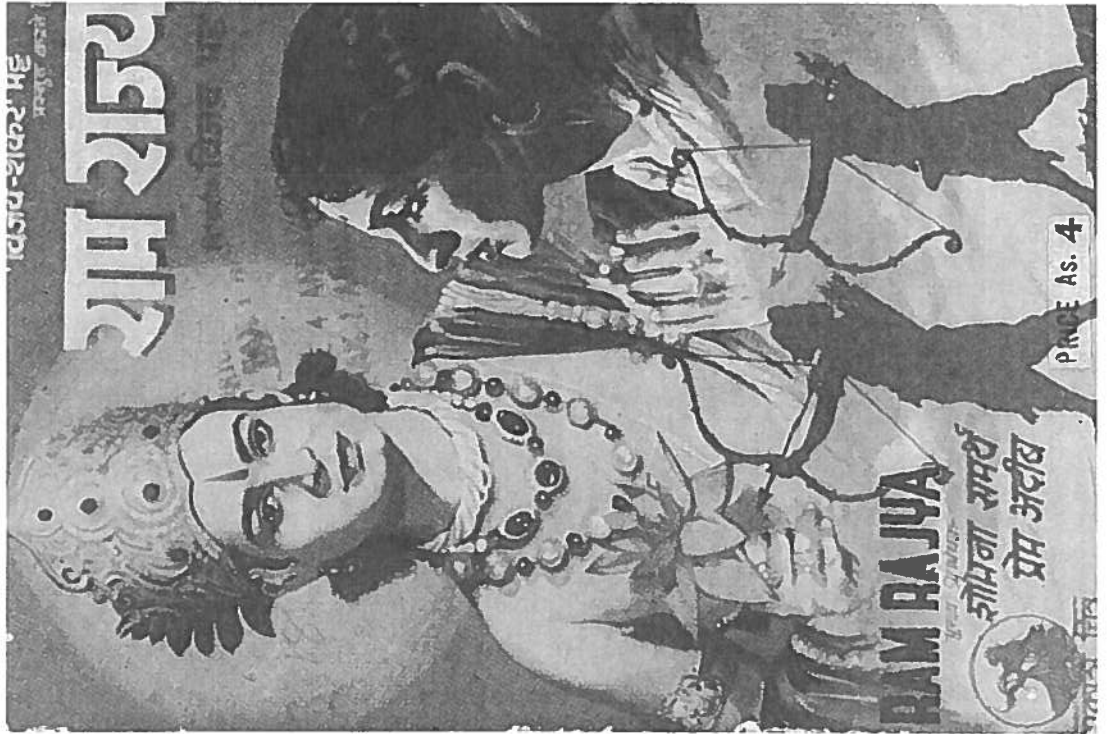


Figure 1.5 Ram Raja (1943, dir. Vijay Bhatt). Cover of song booklet. 'The Kingdom of Ram' was a term used by Gandhi for the ideal Indian polity.



Figure 1.6 Ram Raja (1943, dir. Vijay Bhatt). Shobhana Samarth as Sita.

However, when Gandhi was convalescing in 1945, Bhatt was asked to show him forty minutes of the film but he watched it for over an hour and a half.

Despite the fame these films brought Vijay Bhatt, when Prakash Pictures wanted to make a life of the Buddha there were objections in Sri Lanka where a meeting to discuss the idea was disturbed by protestors.<sup>62</sup> The writer says, 'We are not aware of even one film dealing with the Hindu gods that has been well portrayed as to reflect credit on Hinduism.'<sup>63</sup> The writer uses the word 'exploitation' several times in the article before admitting that Prakash's films are better than most, in that they are sincere, but that they are still not good films, which should be about 'plain-living and high-thinking'.

In 1947, Bhatt went to the US to show his films (*Bharat Milap*, *Ram Raja* and *Vikramaditya*) and to see if he could find a co-producer for this film on the Buddha, which was written in English. However, it seems he had no luck as it was more than fifteen years later that Bhatt made a film on the Buddha, not on Gautama himself but on a convert, Angulimala ('The one who wears a garland of fingers'). Released in 1960, *Angulimala* was produced by the Thai Info Service for the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's *mahaparinirvana* ('attainment of nirvana').<sup>64</sup> However, the film has hardly anything about Buddhism, concentrating instead on Angulimala's upbringing, his

romance, how his 'friends' destroyed him, leading him to become a fearsome murderer before encountering the Buddha (shown as a lotus and then as a human figure, but in fragmented shots to distance him from the human world). The film shows Angulimala's conversion and his elevation to sainthood.

### Independence and beyond

It is not the case that the mythological faded after independence as is the widely held view often voiced in the context of the phenomenal success of *Jai Santoshi Maa* in 1975 (see below). Gokarn's figures (Gokarn n.d.: 82-5) on religious films (her statistics combine the devotional and mythological) show that their numbers remain fairly standard as long as her figures run (up to 1982). However, some striking features can be noted. In the 1930s, the religious films formed a higher proportion of films produced, at their maximum in the last days of the silent movie, when they formed as much as 40 per cent of the annual output (1931-3). However, when the number of other films being made begins to increase, as sound allows the social and other more literary and verbal genres to flourish, the religious genre carries on being made in the same numbers, but is proportionately much lower. The figures of the number of religious films made in a year vary over the years from 1 to 4 on average with the occasional higher figure (maximum 11 in 1979). The only notable clusters are the higher numbers in 1953-57 (for no reason that I know, but maybe due to the search for myths for the new nation and pleas for communal harmony) and 1975-83 (which I would attribute to the success of *Jai Santoshi Maa*, were it not for the fact that 1975 itself saw an increase to 6 films after a decade averaging 2.4, that is before this film met its phenomenal success).

Gokarn's statistics end in 1982 and there is no other source available for the last two to three decades on the number of religious films made annually. However, these would not be comparable because we would have to factor into our accounts the phenomenal audiences for religious programmes on television, such as Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* and B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharata*, as well as the screening of religious films. We should also have very incomplete data on the rise of non-cinematic viewing (VHS, VCD and DVD), which only became possible during this time and is now a major part of any Indian film's distribution. I have a strong impression from viewing the stock in music shops in Mumbai and Pune and talking to sales staff, as well as viewing websites selling Indian films,<sup>65</sup> that these genres remain very popular and old films are constantly recycled but there are no hard statistics on numbers sold, audiences reached and piracy.

The religious films were in decline in the sense that few were major hits or made on large budgets, but they remain a staple of the B-circuit. However, the audience for these films is not necessarily downmarket as many of the films circulate through the Internet and are found in fairly upmarket shops (Alunkar in Pune; Rhythm House in Bombay), though admittedly richer sources are found in more downmarket shops (Grant Road, Lamington Road in Bombay). Religious films are also popular among the diaspora as can be seen in shops, Internet sites, the South Asian cable channels and my conversations with friends. The religious films have remained popular in 'regional' languages but, apart from a very brief discussion below, this lies outside my area of knowledge and the scope of this book.

### Stars as gods, gods as stars

Some of the earlier stars were particularly associated with their mythological roles, so Shobhana Samarth was best remembered for her roles as Sita, and Shahu Modak for his Krishna (and there are many similar famous examples from devotional films, notably Vishnupant Pagnis, see Chapter 2). Other stars, like Durga Khote, acted in many major films from different genres and never came to be associated with their religious roles, and Bharat Bhushan was regarded as a safe bet for any kind of film, mythological, devotional or Muslim social. Perhaps one of the last figures in film to be associated with her roles in religious films was Nirupa Roy. Her films, even folktales like *Naag Panchami* (see below for more on 'snake films'), get good reviews in *Filmfare* as late as 1954.<sup>66</sup> This is a much-loved story set in Shankara's heaven, the snake queen's court, and an earthly court. The snake queen is angry when King Chandradhar and Queen Sanka (Durga Khote) will not worship her so she kills their six sons, giving them another, Lakshendra, who is destined to die by snakebite on his wedding night. His bride Behula (Nirupa Roy) pleads with Shankara for his life.

Roy became regarded as a semi-divine figure, and she reports that when she goes out in public, people sing her *bhajans* and touch her feet.<sup>67</sup> Roy was particularly admired for her roles with Trilok Kapur as the divine couple. A photo caption of them in *Filmfare* says, 'He takes great pains to portray the Gods correctly' (whatever that means) and of her 'The halo that she dons for her work surrounds her with a serene glow off-screen too.'<sup>68</sup> His divine look was remarked on elsewhere: 'Trilok Kapur looks every inch Lord Vishnu.'<sup>69</sup>

In her later years, Nirupa Roy became most famous for playing Amitabh Bachchan's mother in the 1970s and 1980s. Many viewers, familiar with her divine role, may well have felt that this added to the view of him as a demi-god. (For more on stars and divinity, see Chapter 4).

### Mythologicals as stunt movies

The mythological, always regarded as a downmarket genre, becomes firmly established in the B-movie circuit after independence.<sup>70</sup> While this seems largely due to the rise of the social genre (see Chapter 4), the mythologicals were made on lower budgets (often recycling sets and costumes), with B-grade actors and so on. Somehow the mythological in colour has what Christopher Pinney calls a 'sticky mutuality', where the involvement the viewer has with the image becomes less aesthetic, as the image looks newer, brighter and more cheerful (Pinney 2004: 156).

One of the leading exponents of this genre was Homi Wadia's Basant Pictures, which made around 152 films, most of them mythologicals, between 1942 and 1982 from its base in Chembur, Bombay. Some were directed by Homi, some by others including Babubhai Mistry. They made many grades of films among them some A-grade (including the old staple of Parsi theatre, *Hatim Tai*, 1956, dir. Homi Wadia) but many B- and even C-grade films. Homi kept costs down by recycling. For example, he had fifteen sets on *Hatim Tai*, but he then reused these for junior filmmakers to film *The thief of Baghdad*.

J.B.H. Wadia founded Wadia Movietone in 1933 with his younger brother, Homi (1911–2004). Although they made versions of Parsi theatre classics (*Lale Yaman*, 1933, and *Baag-e Misr*, 1934), they were most famous for their stunt films, in particular those which Homi directed, starring Mary Evans, better known as 'Fearless Nadia', later his wife. Homi left Wadia in 1942 to start Basant Pictures when J.B.H. decided to focus on socials, documentary and newsreels. Wadia Movietone made just one mythological, *Vaman avtar* (1934), so it was surprising that Basant, in addition to the expected stunt films, was most famous for its mythological films. I assume that Homi made these films not for religious purposes (he was a Parsi, a humanist) and I guess he found the pictures amusing and awe-inspiring as did his brother, J.B.H. (see above). (Several other non-Hindus were active in making mythologicals, including Babubhai Mistry – see below – also a Parsi. Mistry also made mythologicals for other producers, including A.A. Nadiadwala, a Muslim.)

These films are more about trick camerawork (flying, changing shape and size, burning buildings and so on), stunts and wrestling, than about devotion. Devotion may appear in songs, and is coded in gesture and behaviour but it is definitely secondary to stunts and thrills.

Some of these films received quite a bit of press coverage and became box office hits, such as Basant's 1950 *Shri Ganesh Mahima*:

#### LIFE OF SHREE GANESH:

Basant pictures who have specialised in mythologicals in the past are now going to present the life of Shree Ganesh. Noted for the production of Shree Ram Bhakta Hanuman and the Life of Ghatotkach,

Basant Pictures have engaged a strong cast . . . The lives of practically all the characters of Mahabharata have been screened but not that of Ganesh, a god who is a household word in every Indian home.<sup>71</sup>

Ganesh Mahima at two theatres next week: Ganesh Mahima is the work of a team that has specialised in turning out mythologicals. The story is not too literal transcription from the classics, and deals with the great power that Ganesh is supposed to have held. Though ostensibly about Ganesh, the film actually deals more with incidents from the life of Krishna and the bulk of the footage is Krishna's feverish attempts to clear himself of charges that have been falsely laid at his door.<sup>72</sup>

Ganesh Mahima at three theatres: Shree Ganesh Mahima which is now showing at Lamington, Kismet and Edward deals more with Krishna than with the Ganesh of the title. The plot is based on the old curse of Ganesh that anyone who looks at the moon on Ganesh Chaturthi would fall prey to various forms of calamity. Poor Krishna accidentally has a peek and is forthwith doomed to slander. The film being a mythological one and Lord Krishna being what he is, everything works out to everyone's satisfaction . . . A few of the more miraculous scenes are a little overdone but pleasant enough to the hoipolloi.<sup>73</sup>

Ganesh Mahima a box office hit: Shree Ganesh Mahima topped the list by breaking box office records of all pictures at the Kismet Cinema. The picture is produced and directed by Homi Wadia.<sup>74</sup>

People say that mythologicals appeal only to a particular class of audience, but the thousands that throng the Lamington and Kismet to see Basant Pictures' Shree Ganesh Mahima prove that mythologicals have an all round appeal to every class and the reason for this lies in the polished production, the deft direction by Homi Wadia and the natural acting by Meenakumari, Mangala and Tripathi.

Wadia's next devotional: Basant Pictures creators Shree Ganesh Mahima are due to release their next production Hanuman Patal Vijay next week. Built around the devotion of Hanuman, the direction of the film is by Homi Wadia, who within the rather limited confines of the mythological form has managed to produce what is claimed to be an entertaining picture.<sup>75</sup>

They sometimes had A-grade actors in the films. Meena Kumari appeared in several of them, including their 1951 *Hanuman pataal vijay*, just a year before her first huge hit, Vijay Bhatt's 1952 *Baiju Bawra*.

Wadia's new tale of Hanuman: Homi Wadia, producer of several mythologicals in the past, is releasing his latest offering Hanuman

Patal Vijay this week. The film tells the story of the two demon brothers Ahi and Mahi who ruled over Patal and also shows the great devotion that Hanuman had for Ram. Meena Kumari is the star of the film and she is supported by SN Tripathi who plays the role of Hanuman.<sup>76</sup>

Nanabhai Bhatt (Mahesh Bhatt's father) worked in Basant Pictures for a short while before founding his own Deepak Pictures (1946). His speciality was lower-budget mythologicals than Vijay Bhatt (with whom he had worked earlier) made alongside Arabian Nights fantasies, with the use of dramatic special effects.

Another of the Basant team had a longer and more famous association with Vijay Bhatt, namely Babubhai Mistry (or Mistry) (1919-) from 1933-7. Mistry trained with Bhatt as a special effects director, then became a director and a cameraman. However, it was for his special effects that he remained most famous, in mythologicals and fantasies for Nanabhai Bhatt (*Khivab ki duniya*, 1937) and Basant (*Hatim Tai*). Mistry worked on Ellis Duncan's *Meera* (see Chapter 2) and directed many mythologicals himself, the most famous being 1961 *Sampoorna Ramayana*, and he was consultant for Ramanand Sagar's TV *Ramayana* (see below). However, computer-generated images saw the end of the need for his talents, which had stretched from the silent film, through the black and white era to the end of the century. He was honoured with the Kodak Trophy for Technical Excellence at MAMI 2005 for the sixty-three films he has made.

Mistry's *Sampoorna Ramayana* ('Complete Ramayan', 1961) was very popular, with its dazzling effects and its slightly strange style (Hanuman and his army sing '*Bolo sabhi jai Ram!*'/Everyone sing long live Rama', when building the bridge to Lanka but do so to a calypso tune). My efforts to obtain a copy on VCD met with bemusement about why I did not want a copy of Ramanand Sagar's television series, which was seen as 'better' and more technically proficient. As with oral tellings of the epics, the older films are eclipsed by 'better' versions.

Mistry's *Mahabali Hanuman* (1980) has many scenes that are very similar to those from the *Sampoorna Ramayana*. The film has very popular special effects, such as when Shabari, the 'Untouchable', sings a song that Ram is everywhere, then the flowers are shaken from the tree to form into the name of Ram. There are some dramatic special effects, of monsters changing form, Hanuman flying and changing size, and a river turning to blood, although they look rather dated.

Mistry also made a version of the *Mahabharata* in 1965, which has also been eclipsed by a television version, namely that of B.R. Chopra (see below). The film has Dara Singh as Bhima. (Dara Singh became a great B-movie star, his most famous roles being Tarzan, Hanuman and Bhima.) The episodes are very much as they are depicted on the standard

chromolithographs, but the film has a surprise happy ending, the final scene showing Yuddhishtira on the throne while a verse from the *Bhagavad Gita* is recited.<sup>77</sup>

The VCD of Joy Films' *Bajrangbali* (1976, dir. Chandrakant<sup>78</sup>) has music by the giants of Hindi film, Kalyanji-Anandji. The cover shows the film's emphasis on action and special effects as it has pictures of a four-headed Ganesha with his trunk wrapped around a Hanuman with extra heads. The film has a well-known cast, mostly in B-movies by this time: Dara Singh, Premnath, Mehmood, Mausmi Chatterji [*sic*], Sahu [*sic*] Modak, Durga Khote, *et al.*

The movie has some very bad props and there are some disconcerting moments, such as Shiva and Parvati miming playback singing while flying through the air on a papier-mâché Nandi. Premnath, well-known as a villain in Hindi films, plays Ravana as a pantomime villain, with his catchphrase '*Main Lankesh hui!*' ('I am the king of Lanka') reiterated constantly. However, Hanuman himself is sympathetic, his devotion moving and he has a great sense of humour in part resulting from the juxtaposition of his animal and human qualities. His fights can verge on the slapstick and he uses his tail, always a popular special effect, in the film. He ties people up with it, grows it to several metres and sits on its coils as if on a throne that makes his position higher than Ravana's, and, when the Lankans set fire to his tail, he in turn sets fire to the palace. The film certainly carries religious sentiment, although for the neophyte perhaps it will remain strange as an online review shows:

Bajrangbali: If you think Americans invented Superman, you've never seen a Hanuman film. This monkey god star of the epic Indian poem Ramayana has all the super hero moves without having to moonlight at the Daily Planet. Bajrangbali is in color and the extra-special effects will compensate for the hard to assimilate myth. Do not watch this movie under the influence of mind altering drugs, it could prove fatal. Starring the incomparable Dara Singh 175 minute Unrated Hindi w/subtitles on DVD/VHS.<sup>79</sup>

So although the film is rather good the cover of the VCD shows a range of mythologicals (*Tulsi vivah*, *Hari darshan*, *Har Har Mahadev*, etc.) that are firmly part of the B-circuit, along with horror films (*Dracula*, *Chudail no 1*, *Shaitanon ka horreymoon*) and sex movies (*Drugs and AIDS*, *Sexy girl*, *Hallo doctor*, etc.).

### Jai Santoshi Maa: mythological as family drama

*Jai Santoshi Maa* was a surprise hit film in 1975. It was one of the three biggest hits of the year, alongside *Sholay* (dir. Ramesh Sippy) and *Deewaar*

raise his moral status, but also to give an excuse for more songs. His mother is a new figure in the film and the film loses Satyavati's son.

Santoshi Maa is not the daughter of Ganesh in the Hindi book as she is in the film. Gokarn mentions a Marathi version of the *vratkatha* in which she is an incarnation of Mahalaksmi but Ganesh seems to have been added as a popular figure. In the film, Lakshmi is a rival of Santoshi Maa, but Gokarn points out that the *vratkatha* does not give the names of the three jealous goddesses (Brahmani, Lakshmi and Parvati), nor does it have the curse to make a husband forget his wife, which allows the typical film device of the 'other woman'. Narada is also introduced in the film as a busybody; the *vrata* is cut from sixteen consecutive Fridays to twelve.

In the *vratkatha*, the children eat sour food and Santoshi Maa becomes angry with the family. However, the great denouement of the film is the *udyatpana* ceremony (final ritual after fast), when Satyavati invites her nieces and nephews for food. This becomes the occasion for an elaborate *garba* dance (round dance sacred to the mother goddess) in which the sisters-in-law put lemon in the *kheer* ('rice pudding') to spoil it; children die, the sisters say Satyavati poisoned them so Santoshi Maa appears, restores the children and deforms the sisters-in-law until Satyavati prays and they are restored, becoming devotees of Santoshi Maa themselves.

Although the film is set in some vaguely north Indian village in roughly contemporary time, the cult of Santoshi Maa has become strong in the cities, in particular for lower-middle-class women, for whom this is a fairly easy *vrata*, as it requires only the avoidance of sour foods and removes the need for intermediaries and large expenses.<sup>82</sup> The story of the goddess is also appealing to women as it takes up the popular theme of *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law and daughter-in-law), which has become a staple of television soap operas.

Although *Jai Santoshi Maa* was the biggest hit of its type it should be contextualised in a series of mother goddess films based on *vratkathas* which became popular from the 1960s onwards. Many of these were about localised village mother goddesses, 'Maa', or, further south, 'Amma' figures. Most of these films had many special effects, mostly involving trident-hurling but the *vratkatha*-type performances were more popular. Veena Das (1981) shows that *Jai Santoshi Maa* is a modern version of the goddess story, in which the goddess is not a form of *shakti* ('power') as she does not fight nor does she want anyone destroyed, but is a benevolent figure who only requires the suffering of a single devotee as her sacrifice. Satyavati is a *sati* figure, whose sacrifices and *vrats* ('fasts') force the goddess to intervene and fulfil her personal desires.<sup>83</sup>

The songs of *Jai Santoshi Maa* were a great success among college kids, for whom it became something of a cult film. The music by C. Arjun and lyrics by Kavi Pradeep made Usha Mangeshkar a star and even now many

(dir. Yash Chopra), which starred the 'Angry Young Man', Amitabh Bachchan, securing his subsequent domination of the box office and god-like status. This film is a generic mixture of the mythological, devotional and the social in the manner of a *vratkatha* or story about a fast to propitiate a specific deity rather than a story from the Sanskrit repertoire. In this film, a young woman, Satyavati (Kanan Kaushal), is victimised and bullied by her in-laws and is helped by Santoshi Maa (Anita Guha), a mother goddess, and is finally restored to her husband (Ashish Kumar).<sup>80</sup>

It is often said that Santoshi Maa was a new or local goddess who became popular as a result of the film but there seem to be popular images of her from the 1960s by the well-known firm, Sharma Picture Publications (Pinney 2004: 154–5). Although there are *vratkathas* associated with Santoshi Maa, her origins are not clear. These Hindi and Marathi book versions are somewhat different, the more detailed Hindi version being more like the film, although with some major differences. Kusum Gokarn shows that the film is adapted from a prayer book, *Shri Santoshi Mata puja va vratakatha*, in Hindi, published by Vijaya Balwant Kaushik.<sup>81</sup> The book does not mention any persons or places, thus suggesting this is not necessarily a local goddess. In the film, of course, the characters are given names and these have religious implications. In the book the husband is lazy and does not work, whereas the film makes him a poet and singer, not just to



Figure 1.7 *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975, dir. Vijay Sharma). Satyavati (Kanan Kaushal) pays her respects to the goddesses Brahmīni, Lakshmi and Parvati.

who were teenagers at the time of the release remember learning the songs and the dances for the *artis* (worship with lights). When I mention this book, many people launch into 'Main to aarti utaarun, Santoshi Maa ki' ('I raise the lamps to Santoshi Maa'),<sup>84</sup> and this song is often sung in rituals today.

The film is still shown on television for festivals, such as the last day of Shravana (a month of the rainy season), so it is surprising that there were not more successful copycat films made after it. There were many attempts, often with the same cast (Ashish Kumar, Anita Guha), or with more glamorous stars (Padma Khanna) or even the veterans of the old mythologicals (Shahu Modak, Bharat Bhushan, Trilok Kapoor) but none of these worked. Vijay Sharma, the director of *Jai Santoshi Maa*, who had earlier directed *Rocky mera naam* ('I'm called Rocky'), described as 'most vulgar ... amateur and gross' (Dogra 1977), tried to repeat his success with *Mahapawan teerth yatra* (1975), *Jai Mahalaxmi Maa* (1976) and *Mahasati Naina Sundari* (1979), but none was a success.

### Mythologicals as folktales

One genre which produced some popular films was that of the new folk-tale, whose story may have been made up for a film, featuring magic and popular religious belief rather than big mythologicals. The 1970s and 1980s saw some totally extraordinary horror films.<sup>85</sup> These were often (bad) copies of western films and had very basic special effects (certainly nothing as sophisticated as Phalke's). They copied films such as *The exorcist* (1973, dir. William Friedkin) or films about 'the living dead' (such as *The night of the living dead*, 1968, dir. George A. Romero) with some concessions made to Indian religion such as brandishing an 'Om' symbol rather than a cross, but the religious imagery is highly eclectic at best. The great figures were the Ramsay brothers, Tulsi and Shyam, whose films such as *Bandh daruaza* (1990) have become cult classics. Others such as Mohan Bhakhri added a lot more sex to the horror, in films such as *Khooni mabel* (1987). Although few horror films were made during the 1990s, the last few years have seen A-movie makers such as Ram Gopal Varma experimenting with the genre in a more sophisticated manner, blending it with the ghost story (2002, *Bhoot*; 2004, *Vaastu Shastra*). These are less gothic than the ghost stories of Kamal Amrohi (*Mahal*, 1949) or Bimal Roy (*Madhumati*, 1958) – the latter having a reincarnation theme.

One popular group among these films was 'snake films' in which the hero and/or the heroine is a snake who takes on human form.<sup>86</sup> Snakes are not evil figures in Indian mythology but are auspicious and must be worshipped, especially on festivals such as Naag Panchami. The worship of snakes is a long-established part of forms of Hindu practices. Although

these would seem to be B-movies, appealing to unsophisticated audiences, the star casts and financial success suggest a more diverse audience. However, the low status of these popular films is underlined by the fact that *An encyclopaedia of Indian cinema* (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999) lists over fifty films with 'naag' and related 'snake' words in their titles but discusses only two, the Kannada film *Nagakamika* (1949, dir. G. Vishwanathan), only because it is a folklore film on the lines of the Telugu *Patala Bhairavi* (see below), and *Nagin* (1954, dir. Nandlal Jaswantlal).

Filmistan's *Nagin* was southern superstar Vyjayanthimala's debut in Hindi films, in which she went on to become a major heroine. This film set the style for the erotic, slithery snake dance, with her hit song, 'Tan dole, mere man dole' ('My mind and body sway'). Another south Indian star, Sri Devi, played a *Nagin* in *Nagina* (1986, dir. Harmesh Malhotra), which launched her into superstardom in the north. Although Amrish Puri puts in a strong performance as a villainous Yogi and snake-charmer who fights with a trident, the film is best remembered for the moments when Sri Devi becomes a semi-Nagin (she also turns into a snake at other times). The transformation is marked by her blue-green contact lenses and her wiggling dances, especially that of the hit song 'Main teri dushman' ('I'm your enemy').<sup>87</sup>

Rajkumar Kohli's *Nagin* (1976), which was a box office success, has an all-star cast (Sunil Dutt, Feroz Khan, Jeetendra, Vinod Mehra, Kabir Bedi, Sanjay Khan, Reena Roy and Rekha) and music by composers, Laxmikant-Pyarelal, which takes it into the top class of movies despite the B-movie theme. The film combines the supernatural theme of snakes who come out on *amavasyas* (new moon nights) with revenge. The Nag (Jeetendra) is killed, which means that his wife (Reena Roy), the Nagin, will kill all involved in his murder. Most of this cast got together again for *Jaani Dushman* (1979, Rajkumar Kohli), in which one of Hindi cinema's great actors, Sanjeev Kumar, played a werewolf, not a creature to have featured previously in the Indian imagination.

### Mythological films beyond Bombay

Although I made it clear in the introduction that I make no claims to being encyclopaedic in my discussions of the Hindi film, let alone any other cinemas, I must mention some other traditions in passing. I begin with two language traditions I know before touching on two of the largest cinema industries in India.

Early Bombay cinema was very much dominated by a Gujarati ethos in that many of its makers were Gujarati-speakers (Hindus, Parsis and Muslims), as were many stars and others involved in the process. Furthermore, the intertitles were usually in Gujarati alongside other languages



and the look was often Gujarati (Mehta 1993). However, the coming of sound meant that Gujarati cinema largely came to be produced and consumed in what is now Gujarat state, with few Gujarati films screened in Bombay where Gujarati-speakers formed the second largest minority after the Marathi-speakers. It appears that Gujarati audiences in Bombay switched to Hindi films as soon as sound came, although Gujarati urban theatre continues to thrive until the present.<sup>88</sup> Gujarati films are mostly regarded as B-movies,<sup>89</sup> so it is not surprising that the dominant genres are those which are regarded as belonging to this circuit, notably folktales, in particular, versions of Jeshal and Toral, and stories of local gods and goddesses (Tripathi 1985). This group would include *Ranak Devi* (1946, dir. V.M. Vyas), Nirupa Roy's first film, a semi-historical based on the life of a queen of Junagadh who became a *sati* and has a temple in Wadhvan. Following the massive success of *Jai Santoshi Maa* and other goddess mythologicals in the late 1970s, a Gujarati film was made about the Gujarati goddess, *Jai Bahuchar Maa* (1980, dir. Ramkumar Bohra), the patron goddess of hijras. *Har Har Mahadev* (1983, dir. Girish Manukant) is one of the most popular and famous mythologicals, based on the story of the *Kumarasambhava* ('The birth of the war god'), which was made several times in Hindi. The gods, needing a warrior to fight the demons, decide Parvati and Shiva should have a son, but Shiva is a celibate ascetic. When they send Kama, the god of love, to fire his flowery arrows at Shiva, he is burnt to ashes by Shiva's third eye and Parvati has to perform *tapas* (penance) to seduce Shiva. Riding on the wave of video distribution in the early to mid 1980s, this film was widely seen amongst the British-Gujarati community.<sup>90</sup> These films combine elements of the Hindi film, Gujarati urban theatre and folk traditions as well as several particularly Gujarati dance forms such as the *garba* (a round dance) and *dandia* (a stick dance).

The only Sanskrit film I have seen is *Adi Shankaracharya* (1984, dir. G.V. Iyer), a government-sponsored film (by the National Film Development Corporation) that won the President's Gold Medal and many other national awards. The film is a biography of the founder of Advaita philosophy, Shankaracharya, who travels around India conducting debates as is traditional for *acharyas* (teachers, founders of religious sects). He is accompanied by two characters, Prajmana ('knowledge') and Mrityu ('death'). There are many Sanskrit quotes from the ancient sacred texts, notably the *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, on which, as is required for *acharyas*,<sup>91</sup> Shankaracharya wrote commentaries to found his school of Advaita.

One of the most memorable sequences is the opening shot of five performing the *sandhyavandanam* (twilight prayers), reciting what becomes the theme of the film: *akaashaat patitam toyam, sagaram prati gacchati* ('Water fallen from the sky returns to the ocean'), a metaphor for

Shankaracharya's philosophy of the relationship between the *atmani* (individual soul) and Brahman. I also enjoyed the play within the film based on one of the chief *Upanishads*, the *Kathopanishad*, in which Nachiketa debates the meaning of death with Yama, the god of death. The classical music by the great Balamuralikrishna contributes much to the film.

This film is not quite a mythological, in that Shankaracharya is a historical figure, but it is not a devotional as it is about philosophy. However, it deserves mention not least as a film about an early form of Indian religion but also because Iyer's achievement is remarkable in that he managed to make an engaging film about philosophy and in Sanskrit, a seeming impossibility.

Even the ICC mentions that mythologicals are more popular in south India than they are in any other region (see above), so it is not surprising that the mythologicals dominated the Tamil film industry in the 1930s (although it is reported that socialists such as those with Gohar and Sulochana were also successful),<sup>92</sup> with some companies, such as the East India Film Company, focusing on mythological productions.<sup>93</sup> However, the number drops rapidly during the 1940s and is said to almost disappear by the 1950s.<sup>94</sup> This may be due to the rise of the DMK (Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam – a Tamil nationalist political party), anti-religious, anti-Brahminical and anti-north India. Many movie personnel were associated with the DMK (and indeed went on to be Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu), which influenced films such as *Parasakthi* (1952, dir. Krishnan-Panju),<sup>95</sup> a film which met severe censorship for its temple scene. An anti-religious stance has never been followed in north India.

It seems that this view, like that of the history of the mythological in Hindi cinema, is somewhat distorted. Even during the height of the DMK's involvement with cinema, religious films continued to have some success, with many viewers reading DMK films as being about Tamil identity rather than as anti-religion (Baskaran 1996: 33). Mother goddess films have remained popular, though again perhaps not on the A-circuit, as can be seen in any music shop selling Tamil DVDs and VCDs.

The Telugu film industry has made many hugely successful mythologicals (Arudra 1984). It had a one-man mythological industry based around the actor, Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (1923–96),<sup>96</sup> better known as NTR, who acted in so many mythologicals (forty-two in total, of which twenty-three were stories from the *Mahabharata* and eight from the *Ramayana*) that it seems that these were the only roles he played; he became imbued with a god-like status. However, he also played emperors, kings and folkloric heroes, making a film every six weeks on average. He was already a star when he took his first divine role in his thirtieth film, namely that of Krishna in *Maya bazaar* (1957, dir. K.V. Reddy). This became one of his more famous roles, along with Rama, which he played first in the *Sampoorina Ramayanam* (1958, dir. K. Somu), made in

Tamil then dubbed into Telugu. However, his biggest role was as Lord Venkateshwar of Tirupati<sup>97</sup> in *Sri Venkateswara Mahatmyam*, Lord of Seven Hills (1960, dir. P. Pulliah), in which as an incarnation of the deity, he emerges from the idol and walks towards the audience. He played this role and other incarnations of Krishna/Vishnu in seventeen films.

As in Tamil Nadu, the film industry is very closely associated with politics, and NTR founded the Telugu Desam Party in 1982 and was later Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. From the 1940s to the 1960s, Telugu also had a popular genre of folklore films, which are perhaps regarded as localised mythologicals (Srinivas 2001). NTR was also a star of this genre, and indeed this genre helped make him a star, as Srinivas (2001) shows in his discussion of *Patala Bhairavi* (1951, dir. K.V. Reddy).

Mother goddess films have always been popular in south India, in both Tamil and Telugu. However, *Ammoru* (1995, dir. Kodi Ramakrishna) was the biggest hit of the year in Telugu. It seems its success was largely due to its special effects of morphing and so on, on which a British company, Digitalia, worked for two years. These are much more sophisticated than the flying tridents of traditional goddess movies (though there is one here too), showing instead the monolithic image of the goddess turning into a human astride a tiger, then sending out fire and other forces from her body. However, the film also has a strong story, which is similar in some ways to *Jai Santoshi Maa*, in that it is about a village woman's conflict with her in-laws. She is helped by the mother goddess (Ammoru), and the film has the feeling of a *vratkatha* and social drama. Here, however, the in-laws are involved in tantric magic and the goddess appears as a child servant to help the heroine, Bhawani. The film was dubbed into Tamil as *Ammatti*, where it was also a major box office success.

### Mythologicals as television soap operas

In the late 1980s, when the Indian government relaxed its restrictions on the depiction of religion on television, the mythological had a phenomenal success in the new form of religious soaps. The first major epic, Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana*, was broadcast in January 1987 and ran for seventy-four episodes. It was soon followed by B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharata*, which had ninety-four episodes and broke all viewing statistics with its audience penetration. Anecdotes abound about national shutdown during the screenings of these programmes; I have my own recollections of waiting at Baroda railway station for almost an hour after a thirty-six hour train journey as all the *ricksha-walas* were watching the *Mahabharata*.

Without wishing to enter debates over the comparisons of film and television and the interaction between the two, the striking difference that is relevant for the present analysis is that these television serials, although

they drew on many film conventions (indeed Sagar and Chopra were both famous film directors for many decades), were received by their audiences in a very different way than cinema audiences had ever viewed the mythological film. Among the striking new features was the national viewing at a particular time in the week that created a different audience. The viewing practices themselves were highly disparate – from the private or family viewing in domestic rather than public space, to the public screenings held in areas such as villages where televisions were unaffordable commodities. The transformation of the viewing space into a sacred space was widely noted, as religious ceremonies were performed around the television sets as if the deities themselves were present on screen. In many ways, one may say that the television mythologicals, through the very nature of their medium and the popularity of the programmes across social and even religious groups,<sup>98</sup> succeeded in achieving what the film mythologicals had been trying to accomplish for eighty years with only a limited degree of success.

The simultaneous viewing meant that audiences discussed the meanings of the epics again, creating new interpretative communities, and the simultaneous viewing of the national epics also created a sense of a shared historical (more accurately, mythological) past at a time when the nation was undergoing some of the most rapid and dramatic changes in its history. However, the serials' confluences of existing beliefs about Hindus, and India, history and myth, had enormous political implications, as did the screening of visions of political and familial discussions in the context of Hindu utopias or moral universes, sponsored by state television.

While not many would hold that the screening of the *Ramayana* was the cause of the rise of Hindutva and the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a mosque said to be built on the *Ramjammabhumii* (birth place of Rama), many people regard these serials as Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) propaganda. Even this is an exaggeration, as there is nothing inherently Hindutva in these series<sup>99</sup> and Rama does not belong to the BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) or any political or cultural group. A more balanced view is that the Hindutva forces, already rising on the tide of liberalisation and who had made a canny assessment of the media and its power, drew on the symbols that were circulated in this series for their campaign.<sup>100</sup> B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharata* has aroused less controversy as it was presented as much more of a historical epic than a devotional film and was never directly associated with any political campaigns.<sup>101</sup>

Little has been said about the creation of a new Hindu visual regime in terms of religious practice and belief following these serials, and the spate of subsequent television soaps and growth of religious channels, but perhaps this requires a longer time frame.

### Mythological films today

It may be expected that the arrival of VHS in the 1980s and the decline of cinema-going may have encouraged the making of more specialised B-movies which could have only a video release, as exemplified by Peter Manuel's research (Manuel 1993) on the impact of the cassette culture of the 1980s on music genres, when technology allowed the new medium to change the way music was marketed, consumed, etc. Similar changes might be expected with the mushrooming of cable and satellite television in the 1990s and then the relatively inexpensive VCD in recent years.

Even with the advent of television mythological soaps, the genre survives on the B-movie circuit. Suketu Mehta's book on Bombay sensitively tells the story of Eishaan, an aspiring actor who finally found work in *Jai Shakumbhari Maa*, a film about the Vegetable Goddess, one of the incarnations of Durga (Mehta 2005: 393–406). This goddess appears when there is famine to provide food, and her tears water the land. At the time of the film, there was a vegetable shortage causing political upheaval but even this was not enough to make the film, another family conflict in the style of *Jai Santoshi Maa*, appeal to a wider audience.

The film was made on a low budget (Rs 40 lakhs, or approximately £50,000) in appalling working conditions – the crew and actors were half-starved, and ironically had no vegetables to eat except potatoes. Dara Singh, who is a great star of the B-movies, came on the sets for a day to play a saint who worships the goddess. The film was shot on 16 mm and blown-up, and the producers expected to release it only in villages. They had some religious motivation in making the film in that they were involved with an ashram, but the director was more used to shooting sex films.

Mehta attended a preview screening where he found the film hilarious and high camp but was taken aback that he was the only one in the audience to have this response. When he told others about this experience, they too expressed their reverence for a religious film, even if it is a 'mythological sex comedy'.

The Hindi film has not produced any blockbuster mythologicals in recent years, certainly nothing on the lines of *Ammoru*, but discussions I have had with some senior producers suggest that following the success of historicals in the west it is time for a new Indian epic.

### The mythological film as a much-maligned genre

Many people look down on mythological films and despair of the audiences' taste, such as Satish Bahadur, a well-known film critic and professor at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune:

[beginning with Ravi Varma] who conceived the Hindu pantheon in the lowest sentimental values of Victorian painting and popularised

it in cheap reproductions through another mass medium, the colour printing press. For dramatics, Phalke drew upon the crude elements of the 'Company Natak' not the glories of classical Sanskrit drama or the vital forms of the folk theatre. For story material, Phalke did not delve deep into the spiritual meaning underlying the Hindu epics. Rather he used their most obvious ritualistic and superficial level, viz. the magical, the miraculous and the spectacular in the exploits of the Hindu Gods and goddesses (Bahadur 1976: 91–2).

Some of these films, notably the variety that opt for the cultural heritage and historical style, such as the films made by Vijay Bhatt and Prakash Studios, are praised by film critics:

Rambaan, Vijay Bhatt's latest creation: The golden pages from the epic of Valmiki's Ramayan form the basis of Mr Vijay Bhatt's another great hit, Rambaan. In these days of cheap trading of religious productions, it is indeed a difficult task to offer a picture which faithfully portrays the events and scenes of the immortal works of Valmiki. It is however confidently prognosticated that the picture under the hall mark of Prakash Pictures will prove worthy of its past achievements. The story of Rambaan centres around the episodes originally based on Aranyakand to Lankakand of Ramayana. Art director Kanu Desai is responsible for the outstanding highlights.<sup>102</sup>

Rambaan, Vijay Bhatt's fine mythological: One more picture based on the immortal epic of Ramayan which has been a perennial source of inspiration to all mankind for noble living... The film includes incidents like Rama's and Seeta's exile in Panchvati, the kidnapping of Seeta by Ravan, the march on Lanka (Ceylon), the death of Ravan and the triumphal return of Rama, Seeta and Lakshman to Ayodhya.<sup>103</sup>

Premiere of Rambaan... Prakash appears to have spared neither pains nor money to translate to the silver screen, in all the exquisite emotional contents underlying the incidents, the glorious episodes related in Valmiki's epic poem. Director Vijay Bhatt has very delicately handled the scenes so as to emphasise the full significance of the film. Big mob scenes, huge armies marching and fighting, serve as a foil to the delightful sylvan atmosphere of Panchvati. Ashok Vatika and Golden Lanka are a treat to the eyes. Prem Adib as Rama, Shobhana Samarth as Seeta and Umakant as Lakshman give excellent performances.<sup>104</sup>

Other films come in for criticism for their low aesthetics, such as *Valmiki* (1947, dir. Bhalji Pendharkar):

For Valmiki, Prabhakar Pictures, have ransacked the ever-obliging pages of mythology to conjure up a fitting co-starring vehicle for

Shanta Apte and Prithviraj, both a little past their prime. The film is of course encumbered with all the trappings of mythology including paper crowns and false trinkets. Raj Kapoor, Pratima Devi, Leela and Baburao Pendharkar frolic through this carnival under the pilotship of Bhal Pendharkar. For escapists!<sup>105</sup>

(Other critics enjoyed this film more, praising it for its human viewpoint and the presentation of the whole *Ramayana* in about 400 feet of film.<sup>106</sup>)

Gokarn (n.d.) discusses the social stratification of the audiences for the mythological film, although this seems to be based on her general observations and 'common sense' rather than any ethnographic research. Gokarn argues that mythologicals are 'Not taken seriously by elite intelligentsia of upper middle class society and the youngsters of school and college going age, especially the western educated' (Gokarn n.d.: 102). Many of these films have cult status, such as *Jai Santoshi Maa*. I have noticed that many British Asians have grown up watching these films, often regarding them as kitsch or camp, but nevertheless enjoying them and learning about their 'religious heritage' through them.

Gokarn then says that these films are aimed at the lower middle class of smaller townships and rural masses:

who are still overshadowed by the dark veil of ignorance and illiteracy. Thus they fall an easy prey to the film-makers' cinematic gimmicks of titillating glamour and thrilling spectacles. Moreover, these masses have still not been able to shake off the strong stamp of blind faith, orthodoxy and superstition. They have yet to be awakened from their traditional mode of thinking and their God-fearing attitude towards an unknown and unfathomable Divinity. They are further misguided by fraudulent gurus and god-men. The latter are more concerned with self-aggrandisement than the enlightenment of the gullible masses (Gokarn n.d.: 102).

No doubt part of the reason these films are held in low regard is their popularity among women:

DRAUPADI DRAWS UNENDING CROWDS AT ROXY AND IMPERIAL, BY TVP – An easily noticeable feature of the crowds thronging to see Draupadi is the presence of women of all classes. They seem to think that Draupadi is their special subject. It so happened the other day that my seat was practically surrounded by lady witnesses on all sides and I could notice their reactions to various scenes with peculiar advantage. Their admiration of Sushila Rani in her various moods in the different scenes of Draupadi was obvious. But what impressed me most was their frank remarks in condemnation of courtiers of the

durbar of Dhritrashtra when Draupadi appeals to Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas, for justice. Draupadi has a special reason to do so. Because in an earlier scene she had laid her heart bare to Gandhari and told her that she saw a dark future as a result of the gambling which was advertised by Shakuni as merely for amusement and Gandhari had assured her that she would protect her all through and that she should make her completely at home in her Hastinapur sojourn. Gandhari is helpless and in a rage she throws up her bangles and asks all her warrior courtiers to wear them if they cannot give the protection that Draupadi demanded. The pathos and drama in this incident in the picture is most impressive.<sup>107</sup>

### The enduring popularity of the mythological

Myth itself has enduring popularity. As Wendy Doniger has reminded us throughout her work, film is also a creator of myth itself. These myths survive not because they are historically true or false but because they are held to be true in popular traditions. The cinema may not present the orthodox versions of the myths but it presents popularly held beliefs, the episodes people like to turn to for fundamental stories which can be applied to their daily lives, in a manner which is easy to follow as it may be in the style of other popular genres such as television serials. Thus many family problems are likened to the *Ramayana*, a motif which appears frequently in the social film in an allegorical form, but which is shown directly in the mythological film. These myths answer life's major questions and give us stories to live by as much as stories we spin ourselves through psychoanalysis or whatever other means we choose. One does not have to believe in the stories any more than Freud believed in the Greek myths (Oedipus and others) he used to tell his own stories for our times, or we may not believe in Spiderman, though we may believe that there is a hero inside us who can fight against injustice.

These myths also contain deep-seated and spiritual ideals of golden ages which many people hope they can bring about again, whether a Jerusalem in England or a *Ram Rajya* in India. Many of these myths are regarded as not only religious in value but also as part of India's cultural heritage. This would certainly be true of the *Mahabharata*, which is a foundational text of the Indian nation, its stories known to non-Hindus. However, mythological films are loved also because they are religious – and the pleasures of religion can be mapped.

There are clearly many parallels between cinema-going and religious experiences (see Introduction). The mythological film directly combines entertainment with religious purpose. While the medium of cinema requires the mythological characters to be presented as rounded human characters and their actions need to be explained logically, there is no problem for

many people in seeing things that defy rationality, such as miracles. Many people (not just in India but also in the west) believe in miracles, but this has always been a stick with which to beat the Indian religious film. When religion tries to explain miracles scientifically, it risks losing its sense of awe and mystery at the divine. Many viewers enjoy the awe and astonishment created by these special effects (see J.B.H. Wadia on *Lanka dahan* above) and technology has always had a great appeal in attracting cinema audiences.

The relation of the audience to the screen gods and goddesses may be explained through *darshan* and corpothetics (see above) but one must add to the usual mechanisms of character involvement and the love that one may develop for screen characters, the *bhakti* or devotional love (see Chapter 2), that the viewer already brings to the viewing. Indeed, one of the great pleasures of mythologicals is seeing one's imagined myths and gods on screen. One may have seen them on chromolithographs but there they are two-dimensional and static, or one may have seen them enacted in popular performances but perhaps amateurishly or from a distance and only from one angle. However, film brings the characters to life, projecting them onto a screen and allowing us close-ups and different angles. Film also allows idealisation in that the makers can choose beautiful people and shoot them to look more beautiful; locations can be elaborate or exquisite; and the songs by major composers are sung by the country's best singers.

While it seems that the majority of the audiences for the mythological films were Hindus, the films have been watched by members of other religious communities. Mankekar (2002) notes that the television version of the *Mahabharata* attracted many Muslim and Sikh viewers. These audiences may have been attracted initially by curiosity about the serial's immense popularity but they continued to watch it as they formed their own interpretations of the stories, often drawn from their readings of other television serials.

Another of the great pleasures of the mythological film is closely allied to that of the Indian film's melodramatic mode, namely that we are in a moral universe, where the world is ultimately a safe place, righteousness rewarded and wickedness punished. One can enjoy the pleasures of the cinema, and the mythological in particular, without giving up – indeed by reinforcing – orthodox moral principles such as devotion to gods, respect for elders, love for your country, a wife's devotion to her husband. One can also enjoy the otherwise taboo in the guise of the mythological:

Ironically the only nude sequence in an Indian film was filmed on Sakinabai in a mythological film 'Sati Anasuya' way back in the twenties. Recently, a widely published still from 'Har Har Mahadev' showed Padma Khanna and Gopi Krishna performing some kind of a sexual

circus. The secular deeds of our gods, like making away with the clothes of bathing women, can provide profitable material for Indian mythological film-makers. In fact, it was this particular episode which inspired Raj Kapoor to film that super-hit number of 'Sangam' 'Bol Radha bol'.<sup>108</sup>

As noted above, I have long felt that nationalism has been overdetermined as part of the viewing of Indian cinema, perhaps to give the film some kind of validity, to take it seriously. I am not denying that films are in part about nationalism<sup>109</sup> and 'Indian-ness', and that in recent years they have incorporated the issue of the diasporic Indian (see Chapter 4), but this is just one of many themes that run through these films. There is no doubt that the mythological, in particular during the colonial period, fits in neatly as an allegory of the present, often with a view to avoiding colonial censorship:

MYTHOLOGICAL ALLEGORY, BY SARDI – Unity Production's Kurukshetra is a purely intellectual approach to mythology. It presents a modern allegory, in mythological guise by depicting the similarity between present times when our country is in the throes of political change, faced with famine and sunk in lethargy, and the days of the Pandavas and Kauravas when the cousins fought against one another but in the face of a common foe united together. The treatment of this allegory is novel. The actress becomes so engrossed in her role that following a sad event which opens her eyes to Bengal's starving peasantry, she is inspired with the spirit of Draupadi to serve suffering humanity.<sup>110</sup>

Many thought the popularity of mythologicals could be explained largely as strategies for avoiding censors' cuts, and that they would no longer be popular in independent India:

SENSE AND CENSORSHIP, FREEDOM OPENS NEW ERA FOR OUR FILMS, BY SARDI.

With the dawn of freedom, our films enter a new era of which senseless political censorship will not, we hope, be a part. There was a time, not so long ago, when the uneasy conscience of the foreign government led it to cut out even harmless scenes which merely showed portraits of our political leaders such as GANDHIJI and NEHRU!!! It must be said to the credit of our producers that despite the handicap of censorship, many of them still managed to infuse into their pictures the idea of freedom and its worth. Historical and mythological screen figures particularly were made eloquent mouthpieces for delivering the message of freedom, albeit in a veiled manner. Today

there is no need for us to gloss over facts. While I do not advocate the digging up of old grievances, it is only right that the freedom struggle just ended should find its due place on the screen, not so as to exacerbate the feelings of those who till yesterday were on the other side of the fence, but merely to present facts as they occurred, not necessarily by themselves but woven into the fabric of a film story ... For a time, let us permit the gods and goddesses of mythology to take a well-deserved rest from the screen, and let us pay homage to the valiant men who only recently fought each in his own way to keep the fires of freedom aglow.<sup>111</sup>

This turned out not to be the case, in that the mythological did not disappear, nor did censorship. Mythologicals remained important as ways of interpreting the world. A review of the mythological *Gokul* (1946, dir. Vasant Painter) points out, 'What is really admirable in "Gokul" is the parallel which the producers have drawn between a mythological story, and the current Indian situation.'<sup>112</sup> While:

A MYTHOLOGICAL FILM WITH A TOPICAL THEME, KAMALA KOTNIS LEADS IN AHALYA – This film is a mythological picture but with a theme that is topical even today, namely the plight of abducted women and their rejection by society. The film is not a mere catalogue of miraculous events, but also gives Kamala Kotnis a fine chance for acting in the title role.<sup>113</sup>

The mythological has a more important role in nationalism: to create sacred myths for the new nation, to incorporate mythological and ancient time as well as non-modern worldviews into this new nation, and to define the culture and the cultural heritage of India,<sup>114</sup> albeit in ways that often sat uncomfortably with Nehruvian secular ideals. The mythological supports the widely held view that Indian history began 5,000 years ago in the time of Rama, and that this is a 'sacred history' (Eliade 1959: 95). The serials conflate Indian history with Hindu mythology and culture; they were not the first to do this, but perhaps they intensified and gave it a modern visual form and narrative, which has been open to various political uses, notably the increasing popularity of a Hindutva ideology during the 1990s.

Myths tell us about realities, what really happened at the beginning of time, as myth is more 'real' than the everyday. They move the human into the realm of the gods, making us the gods' contemporaries, living in an eternal present (or an eternal past) rather than in historical time, a time. The gods join us on earth, bringing their divine presence into our world, making that world new and allowing us to refuse the modern. We can enjoy a 'religious nostalgia' (Eliade 1959: 92) and find meaning in a world that can

be resanctified by re-enacting – or re-viewing – the deeds of the gods (Eliade 1959: 99), keeping us in their divine time and sacred realm.

The beginnings of a pan-Indian non-regional style in cinema may be traced back to the mythological, which drew on the pan-Indian imagery of Ravi Varma, the touring Parsi theatre and Sanskrit versions of mythology. Many of these mythologicals, as the television mythologicals, found national audiences despite language issues. With the coming of sound, the Hindi cinema, largely through the social film, created a generic, north Indian-ness, largely centred around Punjab/Uttar Pradesh; even if the city which is most represented, Bombay, is far away from these centres, its population is largely from those regions. With the coming of sound, some more localised and regional mythologicals were made, although it is the devotional film that is strongly regional. While pan-Indian mythologicals (notably from the two great epics) continued to be produced, many non-Hindi film industries in India have also produced films about local deities and this is discussed in the next chapter.

Mythologicals also produce a 'neo-traditionalism'. A clear example is *Jai Santoshi Maa*, which spread a cult of a 'new' deity. However, it is not clear how much the mythological film is influencing practice and belief, although there is some evidence from the television serials, as described by Rajagopal (2001). It seems that India may also have produced 'secular' myths of the nation in films like *Mother India*, but there are no Islamic mythologicals, although there are Islamicate myths of the nation, especially stories of Akbar. These genres are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 below.

The mythologicals are now enjoying a new life as they are transferred to the relatively cheap VCD, and shops in the lower-class locales have an enormous range of these films. Most of my personal collection is from Video Plaza on Lamington Road (Bombay), where these are kept to the fore, the back shelves stocking a variety of (soft?) porn. The religious films are shown on television monitors during festivals.

Although it is not possible to predict the future of the mythological film, there seems to me immense potential for the genre at present, even in the A-circuit. Religion is being talked about more in the world, and is certainly not fading away. The mythological and religious are productive in different media – stories, plays, poems, chromos, painting – but it seems that they cannot shake off their folk image and hence their downmarket element to re-emerge in cinema, although the religious is becoming more present in the social film. If they could do that and draw on new computer-generated imagery, there might be potential in the genre again, not least for the overseas market where the B-grade mythological has remained popular.

Two films from Hollywood may make the Indian producers think again. One was Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), whose spectacular



success may make producers think about a 'Hindu' equivalent. The other was *Troy* (2004, dir. Wolfgang Petersen), which failed for many reasons but in my opinion the major fault was the absence of the gods. Without the gods playing with humans, as they do in Homer's *Iliad*, it is the story of a selfish romance that destroys a city and many people's lives. It seems unlikely that an overtly devotional film would be the starting point for a revival of the mythological film, but a historical type, such as a retelling of the *Mahabharata*, which some major figures in Bombay are already discussing, may well be a move in this direction.

## Chapter 2

### The devotional film

Although it is widely accepted that India's first entirely Indian-made film was *Raja Harishchandra*, some sources, such as Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999) give precedence to R.G. Torney and N.G. Chitre's *Pundalik* (1912), a devotional film about a saint from Maharashtra. A contemporary advertisement from Coronation Cinematograph, Sandhurst Road, Girgaum, says, 'Almost half the Bombay Hindu population has seen it last week and we want the other half to do so before a change of programme takes place.'<sup>1</sup> Gokarn (n.d.: 8) cites a review from the *Times of India*, 25 May 1912 – 'Pundalik has the power to arrest the attention of the Hindus. As a religious drama, it has few equals.' (The Coronation advertisement's mention of the accompanying programme 'New screaming comics' suggests devotion was not the only object of the evening.)

Whichever of the two films was made first, it is not disputed that the mythological (see Chapter 1) and the devotional are the founding genres of Indian cinema. This chapter discusses the devotional genre, films about spiritual devotees (*bhaktas* and *sants*), drawing on India's rich premodern *bhakti* traditions.

Gokarn (n.d.: 3) notes that the generic definition of the devotional is not clear. Like other cinematic genres in India, the mixing or hybridity factor makes it hard to ascribe a film firmly to one category or another. Some may class mythologicals as devotionals as there is some overlap, especially with later films. (See discussion in Chapter 1.) While the generic categories may be leaky (see Neale 2000), my division here allows us to look at very different kinds of films from those in Chapter 1 and I have also mentioned films about 'godmen' in this chapter as they are very much in the spirit of the earlier devotional films.

As well as the mythological, the devotional genre is also closely aligned with the historical (see Mukhopadhyay 2004) in its presentation of historical figures rather than mythological, heroic or divine characters. Within historical, I include legendary or hagiographical figures as well as those from actual history. So while the life of the devotee may be hagiographical