Who Wants to be a Goddess?
Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited

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> Audiences were showering coins, flower petals and rice at the screen in appreciation of the film. They entered the cinema barefoot and set up a small temple outside…. In Bandra, where mythological films aren't shown, it ran for fifty weeks. It was a miracle.

> Anita Guha (actress who played goddess Santoshi Ma; cited in Kabir 2001:115)

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

Genre, Film, and Phenomenon

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

Of the four hundred and seventy-five Indian films released in 1975, three enjoyed enormous success. All were in Hindi, the lingua franca of the entertainment industry based in Bombay (a.k.a. Mumbai), lately dubbed "Bollywood," which (although it

generates less than a quarter of national cinematic output) enjoys the largest audience throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond. *Sholay* ("Flames") and *Deewar* ("The Wall"), were both heavily-promoted "multi-starrers" belonging to the then-dominant genre sometimes referred to as the *masala* ("spicy") film: a multi-course cinematic banquet incorporating suspenseful drama, romance, comedy, violent action sequences, and song and dance. Both were expensive and slickly made by the standards of the industry, and both featured Amitabh Bachchan, the male superstar whose iconic portrayal of an "angry young man" would dominate the Hindi screen for the next decade. Female characters were marginal to both, and this was not surprising given that their target audience was young urban males, who strongly identified with their themes of honor and revenge.

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

The chronology of early cinema in India closely paralleled its development in the West, from the first demonstration of the Lumière brothers' cinématograph in Bombay in July of 1896, only six months after its unveiling in Europe. Both in its technology and content, early cinema carried the cachet (or stigma) of being a foreign innovation, and was largely confined to the new commercial cities of the British Raj, where it was patronized by European residents and the Anglophone elite. Even after Indian producers became active—this is generally dated to May of 1913, when D. G. Phalke released his 50-minute feature *Raja Harishchandra*—the bulk of films shown on Indian screens continued to be foreign, with American output dominating, a situation that prevailed until

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[1] I use the Romanized spelling of the title given in the film credits. Elsewhere I spell the goddess' name as Santoshi Ma.

well into the sound era of the 1930s.[2] Both nationalism and religious feeling inflect Phalke's oft-quoted account of his 1911 viewing of a film called *The Life of Christ*, which caused him to mentally visualize "the Gods, Shri Krishna, Shri Ramchandra," and to ponder the question, "Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?" (Rajadhyaksha 1993:49). Phalke's 1913 effort, based on an episode in the *Mahabharata*, was the first of nearly a hundred films he would make over the next two decades, almost all based on epic and puranic tales. These included *Lanka Dahan* ("The burning of Lanka," 1917), depicting the monkey Hanuman's exploits in the *Ramayana* and said to have been "India's first big box-office hit" (Rangoonwalla 1983:33), and *Shri Krishna Janma* ("the birth of Lord Krishna," 1918). The appearance of the divine incarnations Rama and Krishna in the latter two films is said to have elicited a powerful response from viewers, as "…men and women in the audience prostrated themselves before the screen" (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:15). Significantly, Phalke seems to have catered to—indeed, helped to create—a different audience than that which patronized foreign films. He advertised in vernacular newspapers rather than in the English-language press, and took his shows to the hinterland, often by bullock cart, to offer inexpensive screenings to rural audiences who sat on the ground before makeshift screens (ibid.).

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

Mythological/devotional films accounted for all but one of the twenty-five feature films made by Indian producers prior to 1920 (Rangoonwalla 1983:35), but cinematic content changed rapidly in the next decade. Dhiren Ganguli's *Bilat Ferat* ("England Returned," 1921), offered a contemporary comedy of manners, and Madan Theatres' *Barer Bazar* ("Marriage Market," 1922) dramatized a social problem (ibid. 40-49). There were historical dramas like *Simgadh* ("The Fortress of Simgadh," 1923), on the life of the Maratha king Shivaji, and thrillers like *Kala Naag* ("Black Cobra," 1924), based on a sensational murder case in Bombay (ibid. 49-50; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1995:227). The variety of nascent genres suggested by these titles reflects the pressure of competition within a growing industry (by 1930, India was producing close to 200 films per year), which caused filmmakers to seek new sources of appealing narrative.

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[2] E.g., as late as 1926-27, the year's output of 108 Indian-made films competed for screens with 1,429 imported features, roughly eighty per cent of which were American (Shah 1950:34-35).

Mythologicals continued to be produced (and re-produced: e.g., the *Mahabharata* tale of Savitri had been filmed at least eight times by 1937; Barnouw and Krishhnaswamy 1980:100), but they comprised a shrinking percentage of output. According to B. V. Dharap, they accounted for roughly seventy per cent of films made prior to 1923, but only fifteen per cent of those made between 1923 and 1930 (Dharap 1983:80). They experienced a brief resurgence with the coming of sound in 1931, accounting for some forty per cent of films during the next three years, but then their output fell again, to an average of between five and ten per cent of annual production (ibid. 81). These statistics cover the whole of India and thus include regions of the south where mythological films continued to be made in sizeable numbers (e.g., the Telugu language cinema of Andhra Pradesh; Shah 1950:120-122). In the dominant Hindi language cinema, according to Nasreen Munni Kabir, the mythological "had virtually disappeared by the 1950s" (Kabir 2001:114)—a fact that would make the success of *Jai Santoshi Maa* more striking.

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

Explanations for the fluctuating commercial fortunes of these films have been offered, however. The preference of early directors for mythological subjects has been attributed to the social and technical constraints they faced: in order to reach a mass, multi-lingual, and largely illiterate audience without the use of sound, they relied on culturally familiar stories that permitted them to develop complex narratives without dialog (Kabir 2001:110). Such narrative familiarity was relied on whenever a new technology was introduced, which explains the brief resurgence of mythologicals in the early sound era (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:90).[3] This argument may be further extended to the expansion of television viewing in the 1980s, which received a boost from phenomenally popular serialized versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*—the

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[3] The authors note the importance of "familiarity" for Indian audiences: "For decades, an Indian producer, asked why a film was popular, was likely to say, 'Because the people know the story.' Familiarity, not novelty, was long considered the safest investment." (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:90) Cf. Rosie Thomas's similar assessment of mainstream Hindi cinema in general: "What seems to emerge in Hindi cinema is an emphasis on emotion and spectacle rather than tight narrative, on *how* things will happen rather than *what* will happen next, on a succession of modes rather than linear denouement, on familiarity and repeated viewings rather than "originality" and novelty, on a moral disordering to be (temporarily) resolved rather than an enigma to be solved." (Thomas 1985:130)

most successful examples of mythological-style entertainment after *Jai Santoshi Maa* (Lutgendorf 1990:127-141).

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

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

Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar's playful "caste system" of film genres—which posits the mythological as *brahman* (priest/sage), the historical film as *kshatriya* (warrior/aristocrat), and the action-packed "stunt film" as *shudra* (serf/manual laborer; Kakar 1989:25)—has some validity for the early cinema. Many conservative and pious people condemned films as corrupting and immoral—likely to "arouse passion and cause sexual promiscuity, leading to masturbation, loss of eyesight, and…impotence" (Khare 1985:142), but would sometimes make an exception for religious films; thus Mahatma Gandhi, who disapproved of cinema, is said to have seen only one film in his lifetime: Vijay Bhatt's 1945 mythological *Ram Rajya*—"Rama's Reign" (Dharap 1983:82). "Stunt films" popular in the 1930s and 40s, featuring avenger-style superheroes intervening in defense of underdogs, appealed particularly to the urban working classes.

Yet Kakar's invocation of ancient *varna* categories obscures other social divisions in contemporary India. As noted earlier, Phalke targeted his mythological films at a vernacular-speaking and partly-rural audience rather than the urban middle class who patronized Anglo-European films. In subsequent decades, stunt films and mythologicals were in fact often made by the same studios, whose directors "talked of mythologicals as 'nothing more than stunt films that happen to be about gods'" (Thomas 1987:304-305). Both were aimed at less-educated and generally less-prosperous audiences, urban for the stunt films, rural for mythologicals—though the latter were also known to appeal particularly to women (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980:47; Shah 1950:106).

Although the advent of sound led to Indian-language films gradually edging out foreign competition, the growing status of English as elite lingua franca led to new conventions of coding for target audiences. In Bombay cinema, "A-grade" films (generally "socials") displayed their titles and credits in Roman script and using English terminology ("director," etc.), and peppered their dialog with English words and phrases. The fact that the opening credits of *Jai Santoshi Maa* appear entirely in Devanagari script and feature Sanskritized-Hindi neologisms (e.g. *digdarßak* for "director") is an immediate signal that it aims for a different audience, as Bombay journalist Ashok Banker forthrightly observes in his notes on the film.

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

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

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

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

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

Analyzing a Goddess, Dissolving a Film

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

Sociologist Veena Das's 1980 essay on the film includes a synopsis of its plot, but quickly moves to an ambitious typology of mother goddesses within which she situates Santoshi Ma; she then speculates on the socio-religious concerns of the film's primary fans, whom she identifies as lower-class urban women. Although Das makes factual errors that suggest a perhaps cursory viewing of the film (thus she identifies the Santoshi

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[4] In India, as elsewhere, the "scientific wonder" aspect of cinema was a much-touted part of its attraction from the beginning. If audiences did not fully understand how it was accomplished (how many did in the West?), they nevertheless knew that they were watching projected photographic images. Dharap in fact appears to be unreflectively invoking a broader iconoclastic discourse, while ignoring the fact that cinema-goers everywhere forget about technology (and indeed, forget themselves) to experience powerful emotions from film images.

Ma fast as comprising twelve Fridays rather than sixteen, and asserts that the goddess becomes angry with her devotee in the climactic scene), she offers, albeit in passing, two penetrating and related observations. These concern the relative centrality of the human heroine ("It seems to me that in an important sense one may justifiably ask whether the true subject of this story is not Santoshi Ma, but Satyavati"; Das 1980:49), and the parallel structure of the film's two main narratives, divine and human ("Every significant chain of events relating to Satyavati points to a successive movement in the evolution of Santoshi Ma…."; ibid.). Surprisingly, neither of these insights seems to have been pursued in subsequent scholarship, but I will return to them shortly.

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

Another presenter on the AAR panel was Kathleen Erndl, whose work on Santoshi Ma was part of research on goddess cults of the Punjab hills, which eventually resulted in the monograph *Victory to the Mother* (1993). Its chapter on "The Goddess and Popular Culture" devotes a section to Santoshi Ma, who "has taken all of northern India by storm"; yet Erndl says little about the film, beyond noting its massive popularity (Erndl 1993:141-152). She summarizes Santoshi Ma's story based on written sources, and identifies the goddess with the lion-riding Sheranvali popular in northwestern India, an unmarried goddess who is both virgin and mother, and whose historic worship through shakta and tantric ritual (including blood sacrifice) has been sanitized, in recent times, by her increasingly urban and middle class devotees (ibid. 3-6). Contra Das and Brand, Erndl argues that there is nothing particularly "new" about Santoshi Ma, apart from her unusually rapid diffusion through the media of print, film, and radio (ibid. 144).

Another presenter at the 1984 panel was Stanley Kurtz, then a graduate student in anthropology at Harvard, working on a dissertation on the Santoshi Ma cult. In the course of his fieldwork, Kurtz concluded, like Erndl, that Santoshi Ma was not perceived by devotees as distinctive or new, and was in fact often confused with other popular goddesses (Kurtz 1992:2-4, 15-16). Like Das, he became principally interested in creating a comprehensive typology of female deities, but in the service of a yet more ambitious agenda: a reworking of Freudian theory to account for the different cultural aims of Hindu childrearing. His resulting book, *All the Mothers Are One* (1992) includes an extended discussion of both the printed and cinematic narratives of Santoshi Ma,

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[5] I am grateful to John Stratton Hawley and Kathleen Erndl, who both participated in the panel, for sharing information concerning the papers.

focusing on the tension Kurtz identifies between an Indian child's "natural" and "in-law" mothers (the women of its father's family, who play a key role in childrearing; ibid. 111-131). Kurtz's critique of the cultural biases inherent in earlier psychological studies of Indian childhood is often fascinating, yet his use of Freud's theory of infantile sexuality to explain the multiplicity of Hindu goddesses (as reflecting unconscious memories of early experiences with multiple female caregivers) is certainly open to question.

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

From *Katha* to Camera

Whereas most mythological and devotional films of previous decades were either based on episodes in Sanskrit epic and puranic literature or on the legends of spiritual exemplars of the past, *Jai Santoshi Maa*, which has as its principal human character a village housewife living in (more or less) present-day India,[7] is based on a story drawn from a popular pamphlet belonging to the genre known as *vrat katha*. A *vrat* is a disciplined religious observance for a fixed period (usually a day), involving partial or complete fasting, the ritual worship of a deity, and the recitation or hearing of a relevant *katha* or "story." *Vrat* stories generally fall into two categories: one explains the origin of the *vrat* or of the deity in whose honor it is observed, and the other describes the paradigmatic observance of the *vrat* by a human devotee; something usually goes awry in this observance, with disastrous consequences that are overcome by performing the *vrat*

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[6] I am considerably helped by having access, as previous scholars did not, to a good-quality copy of the film in DVD format (Mishra 1975, distributed by Worldwide Entertainment Group), which greatly facilitates analysis of its scenes. The DVD also offers optional English subtitles.

[7] The film's earthly sets create a rustic milieu that (as in many Hindi films with rural settings) is intentionally vague as to locale or chronology; though there are no specific details to suggest the late twentieth century, neither are there any that would signal a particular period in the past, and the pilgrimage sites visited by the heroine and her husband are obviously contemporary, with asphalt streets and overhead electrical wires visible in some shots.

correctly a second time. Some *vrat* rituals may be undertaken at any time; others occur on fixed dates that recur at weekly, monthly, or annual intervals. Some have specified aims—often the protection and wellbeing of relatives, especially husbands, brothers, or sons—whereas others seek the fulfillment of wishes. Although Indian men sometimes perform *vrat*s, women are far more inclined to this type of ritual and many *vrat*s are passed down within families through women's oral tradition (Pearson 1996:3-11).

The ideology and practice of *vrat*s may be very ancient—a form of folk religion that developed parallel to the sacrificial and ascetic practices attested in Sanskrit texts, but that was transmitted orally and largely ignored by male ideologues. Numerous *vrat*s are described, and their stories recounted, in the later puranic literature, which suggests a belated brahmanical recognition of the appeal of these rites, as well as an effort to standardize and regulate their practice—e.g., through the stipulation of priestly mediation at some of the rituals. Such aims are also reflected in the modern literature of inexpensive pamphlets sold at religious bookstalls; the authors (when identified) are usually brahman *pandit*s and the language Sanskritized Hindi. Nevertheless, the easy accessibility of such pamphlets, coupled with the gradual increase in women's literacy, has facilitated the independent performance of *vrat*s by many women.

Long neglected by scholars of Hinduism, *vrat* rituals and stories have recently attracted interest as part of a broader recuperation of women's religious experience (Pearson 1996:xv-xvi). Scholarship encompasses both critiques of *vrat*s as "rituals contributing to the subordination and disempowerment of women"—and indeed, *vrat* stories generally encode a patriarchal ideology, making a woman responsible, through correct ritual, for the health and success of her male kin—and accounts that stress women's perceptions of agency, creativity, and ritual empowerment through *vrat* performance, as well as the role of such observance (which may include group rituals done outside the home) in maintaining women's social networks (ibid. 8-9). Moreover, although written *vrat* stories generally present a mechanistic vision of ritual performance, in which seemingly minor errors provoke divine "anger" and prompt retribution—hardly surprising when one considers that the authors draw on the fastidious model of Vedic sacrifice—women practitioners sometimes modify or simplify the rituals, or indicate their conviction that "intention," "faith," and "devotion" take precedence over ritual precision (ibid. 113-119).

As I noted earlier, the worship of Santoshi Ma through a voluntary *vrat* observed on Fridays with the aim of fulfilling wishes had been spreading in northern India for more than a decade prior to the making of the film. The film itself incorporates both a modified enactment of the story and a paradigmatic performance of the ritual. It may be assumed that many women who viewed it already knew the *vrat* story, or would learn it through their own film-inspired performance of the ritual (which, as noted, includes a reading of the story), hence the inter-textual relationship between the two versions of the tale must figure in an analysis of the film.

I must disagree with the claim that there is nothing new or special about Santoshi Ma, despite her physical resemblance to some other goddesses and her worshipers' claims, in certain contexts, that "all Mothers are one."[8] Her distinctive features figure

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[8] Kurtz's repeated references to "an everchanging array of goddesses" who "replicate, expand, merge, and contract in number and type" (Kurtz 1992:98), and to an "ongoing,

implicitly in both her *vrat* and her film and doubtless contributed to the success of both. In identifying these features, I want to expand on Das's observation that Santoshi Ma appealed especially to lower-class urban women seeking relief from "the everday tensions of existence" by invoking "a goddess who is gentle, benevolent and dependable" (Das 1980:54). Santoshi Ma is the daughter of Ganesh, god of favorable beginnings, who is worshiped to "remove obstacles" and insure success. His auspicious elephant head, generous paunch, and hand-held bowl of rounded *laddu*s (a rich sweetmeat that is his favorite) suggest his association with the achievement of this-worldly aims, as do the names of his wives, Riddhi and Siddhi—"prosperity" and "success" (sometimes collapsed into the hyphenated name of a single consort). Although references to Ganesh's family life (apart from his childhood relationship with his own parents, Shiva and Parvati) are rare in classical mythology, the revelation that he has a daughter named "Santoshi" seems not inappropriate. This word, connoting "satisfaction," "fulfillment," or "contentment," invokes the constellation of terms and practices associated with what John Cort calls the "realm of wellbeing"—the pursuit of "health, wealth, mental peace, emotional contentment, and satisfaction in one's worldly endeavors," rather than the attainment of spiritual liberation, salvation, or a more favorable future birth (Cort 2001:7, 187-200). It is also important to note that, in the context of this goddess, the word alludes both to "fulfillment" in general, and also to the fulfillment of specific requests made by the observer of her *vrat*. Unlike other popular *vrat*s enjoined on women by their families, such as *Karva chauth* (observed for the welfare of husbands) or *Bhaiyya duj* (done for the benefit of brothers), the Santoshi Ma *vrat* is elective and is open-ended in terms of its goal.

The simplicity of the *vrat* is striking: it is be observed on a series of Fridays (some pamphlets prescribe that it be continued until one's wish is granted; others specify four months or sixteen weeks, a timespan popularized by the film) by doing *puja* or ceremonial worship with flowers, incense, and an oil lamp before an image of Santoshi Ma and offering her a bowl of raw sugar and roasted chickpeas (*gur-chana*).[9] These are simple, inexpensive foodstuffs—the former a raw ingredient for making sweetmeats, the latter a common snack, especially of the poor—and the instructions require a very small quantity of each—in effect, a few pennies worth.[10] That Santoshi Ma is satisfied with such offerings again underscores her benevolent character as well as her accessibility to

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kaleidoscopic process wherein new goddesses are generated and recombined" (ibid. 121) reflect the perceptions of an outside observer. To an individual Hindu worshiper, there is no "everchanging array of goddesses," but rather a limited number of divine Mothers who are approached for the specific needs at which they specialize. Though worshipers, if pressed, will often articulate the idea that all such goddesses are ultimately manifestations of a single divine feminine power or *shakti*, they nevertheless take the goddesses' individual personalities and functions for granted in their dealings with them.

[9] My description of the ritual and story is based on Simha and Agnihotri 2000:338-339. This massive compendium of hundreds of *vrat*s includes a version of the story that closely corresponds to the pamphlet versions cited by other scholars; indeed Das noted in 1980 that such standardization seemed to be the outcome of print-media transmission (Das 1980:55).

[10] Texts generally specify a quantity having the auspicious value of "one-and-a-quarter," but the unit of measure may be tiny; thus Santoshi Ma will be content with as little as "one-and-a-quarter *anna*" worth of *gur-chana* (in pre-Independence currency, an *anna* comprised one-sixteenth of a rupee).

poor devotees. The worshiper should take a bit of *gur-chana* in hand and recite or listen to the *katha*. Afterwards, the offerings in the bowl may be fed to a cow, or distributed as the goddess's *prasad*. The only other stricture is that the performer of the *vrat* should eat but one meal during the day and should not eat, or serve to anyone else, sour or bitter foods. When one's wish has been granted, one is required to serve a festive meal—which should likewise not include any sour dishes—to eight boys; this ceremony of thanksgiving, common to many *vrat*s, is known as *udyapan* or "bringing to conclusion." The *vrat* story to be recited or heard as part of the ritual may be summarized as follows.

> An old woman's seven sons were all hardworking except the youngest, who was irresponsible; hence his mother served him each night, without his knowledge, the leavings of his brothers' dinners—food that was *jutha* or polluted. His wife became aware of this and told him; horrified, he left home to seek his fortune. He found work with a wealthy merchant and became prosperous, but forgot about his wife. Years went by and the abandoned wife was abused by her in-laws, forced to cut wood in the forest, and given only bread made of chaff and water served in a coconut shell. One day she saw a group of women worshiping Santoshi Ma; they told her about the sixteen-week *vrat* that fulfills wishes. The wife successfully performed it, wishing for her husband's return. As a result, Santoshi Ma appeared to him in a dream and told him of his wife's plight. By her grace, the husband quickly closed his business and returned home with great wealth. Angry at his wife's mistreatment, he set up his own household, where his wife conducted the *udyapan* ceremony. But his in-laws contrived to have sour food served to the eight boys, offending the goddess; as a result the husband was imprisoned for tax-evasion. His wife prayed for forgiveness and performed the *vrat* and *udyapan* a second time, successfully. Her husband was released from prison and she soon gave birth to a handsome son. Later, Santoshi Ma paid a visit to the family, assuming a fearsome form. The couple's in-laws fled in terror, but the pious wife recognized her patron goddess and worshiped her. Her in-laws then begged for forgiveness, and the whole family received the goddess's blessing. "As Santoshi Ma gave to this daughter-in-law, so she will give to all." (Simha and Agnihotri 2000:338-339)

Several features of the story merit comment. That its characters are nameless and generic—"an old woman," her "seventh son," and so on—is typical of what A. K. Ramanujan calls the most "interior" kind of folktales: those generally told by women within domestic space. When such tales move outside the home and are taken up by professional bards in public space, the characters acquire names and more complex personalities (Ramanujan 1986:43-46)—as will those in the movie. Secondly, the goddess in the story, though named, is not explained or introduced (although the booklets identify her elsewhere as the daughter of Ganesh and Riddhi-Siddhi); she simply *is*, although the heroine does not initially know about her. The third notable feature is the mechanistic nature of the *vrat*: when a ritual error occurs through no fault of the heroine's, an evil result befalls her automatically, which can only be remedied through her corrected ritual performance. All of these features were significantly altered in the

transformation of this minimal narrative—comprising but a few pages in most published versions—into a two hour and twenty minute feature film.

Jai Santoshi Maa Re-Viewed

The film opens with a still of a carved temple image of Santoshi Ma, stained red-orange with *sindur* (a paste made of vermillion and oil), and adorned with jewelry and fabric. The smoke of incense rises, and an unseen narrator announces:

> The greatness of Santoshi Ma is limitless. Each devotee has extolled her greatness in a unique way. This film's story is likewise based on some religious books and on popular stories (*lok kathaem*). We hope that you will accept it in a proper spirit. Hail to Santoshi Ma!

The request to accept the film "in a proper spirit" alludes to certain potentially controversial episodes in the film (to be discussed below). The claim that it is based on sources that include texts and folktales is a further disclaimer of imaginative license (which, in religious stories, is condemned in theory, though in practice it is rampant and generally relished). There follows a clever credit sequence superimposed over another, more humanized image of Santoshi Ma as a young maiden holding a sword and trident—an adaptation of the standard poster, and also the icon that the film's human heroine will be shown worshiping in her own first appearance. The credit titles emanate, via rays of light and little puffs of smoke, from the goddess, hover briefly in front of her, then dissolve into cartoon-images of the standard trappings of worship that array themselves around her: garlands, bells, sweets, and most significantly, a row of clay lamps that slowly form at the base of the image; there are sixteen by the end of the credits, alluding to the Fridays of the *vrat*.

Within the animation, there are visual puns: thus the name of a singer, "Pradip," appears with its first syllable (*pra*) omitted and replaced with a lamp, (*dip* in Hindi); the lamp morphs into the missing prefix, then back into one of the sixteen votive lights. The accompanying music is jaunty and lighthearted, setting a mood that is playful and entertaining rather than solemn and dramatic.

I will describe the film's early scenes in some detail, for they introduce its principal characters and themes. It opens in what is obviously *dev-lok*—the "world of the

gods"—a setting immediately recognizable to anyone who has seen a mythological film. The basic elements of this heavenly realm, imagined as lying above the clouds, are decorated walls and plinths that rise out of a drifting, dry ice-generated fog. Ganesh and his family are seen celebrating the autumn festival of *Rakhi* (a.k.a. *raksha bandhan*, the "tying of protection"), when sisters tie string bracelets on the wrists of their brothers and receive from them sweets, gifts, and the promise of protection. Ganesh is receiving a bracelet from his sister Manasa, but his two little sons are distressed because they have no sister to likewise honor them. The divine sage Narada appears, immediately recognizable by his costume and stringed instrument as well as by his cry, "Narayan, Narayan!" (one of the names of Vishnu, of whom he is a devotee). In Hindu mythology, Narada is a mischievous busybody, a cosmic tourist who flits about the worlds eavesdropping and stirring up trouble. He takes up the children's nagging of Ganesh ("Daddy, bring us a sister!"), piously announcing that the god "who fulfills everyone's wishes" must not disappoint his own sons. Ganesh is visibly annoyed by this demand that he sire another child, and his two wives appear embarrassed and downcast. But after additional pleading, in which the god's sister and wives likewise join, Ganesh becomes thoughtful and raises his right hand in the "boon-granting" gesture. Tiny flames emerge from his wives' breasts and move through space to a lotus-shaped dais, where they form into a little girl, upon whom flower petals rain down. Riddhi and Siddhi are overjoyed. Crying, "Our daughter!" and "Oh, my little queen!" they embrace her affectionately and lead her to her brothers for the tying of the *rakhi* bracelet. The little girl then faces the camera and bows slightly with palms joined while Narada extols her: "This mind-born daughter of Lord Ganesh will always fulfill everyone's desires, will cause the Ganges of gratification to flow, and known by the name of 'Mother of Satisfaction,' will promote the wellbeing of the whole world. Hail Santoshi Ma!"

Narada extols the greatness of newborn Santoshi Ma.

Through this charming scene—which assumes that the gods celebrate holidays just as human beings do, and that they may similarly be pestered by their children—the responsibility for Santoshi Ma's birth is diffused over numerous agents: the nagging boys and busybody-sage, the humbly-entreating wives and more forthright Manasa, and, of course, Ganesh himself. This collective agency of divine figures, acting out of apparently

human motives albeit with super-human powers, and displaying no evidence of omniscience or even of much forethought, will characterize the portrayal of all but one of them throughout the film. It is a style of representation that is entirely "traditional"— attested to by centuries of oral and written narrative, visual and performance art, and now in several decades of mythological films. Whereas the praising of deities in worship or in philosophical discourse may emphasize their "otherness" to the human—their being eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, etc.—the praising of deities through stories about their "acts" (*caritra*) or "play" (*lila*) stresses their human-like qualities, which are vividly evoked. For the majority of Hindus, such divergent discourses coexist unproblematically in their respective contexts.[11]

It is clear that Ganesh is reluctant to create a daughter; he yields only to placate his sister, sons and wives. As Kurtz notes (drawing on Lynn Bennett's research), Santoshi Ma is thus established as a "sister-daughter" goddess, filling a role that, in the context of north Indian patriarchy, connotes both auspiciousness and liability (Kurtz 1992:21-25; cf. Bennett 1983). A daughter gives joy to her brothers and female relatives —and the maternal affection of Riddhi and Siddhi is especially evident—but is a worry to her father, who must ultimately provide her dowry, guarantee her chastity, and oversee her transfer to another family. As we witness the "birth" of the little girl-child whom Narada paradoxically hails as a "Mother" of fulfilled wishes, we may recognize the ambivalent welcome she receives—a cooing embrace from her mothers, a somber stare from her father—as representative of the emotions that often attend the birth of a daughter in India.

By including this birth story, the film, like the *vrat* pamphlets, implicitly addresses the "newness" of Santoshi Ma, a goddess of whom viewers may not have been previously aware. Of course, once accepted as a goddess, she cannot be thought of as "new," since the deeds of gods by definition occur in atemporal *puranic* time. Nevertheless, Santoshi Ma is "born," and thus belongs to the category of gods with birth narratives—such as Ganesh himself, and also Skanda and Hanuman—whose genealogies

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[11] A. K. Ramanujan labels such representation of deities "domestication" and attributes it especially to "folk" retellings of their deeds (Ramanujan 1986:66-67). However, although one can cite (as he does) specific instances in which a distinction between relatively more dignified and more domesticized representations are found in respectively "elite" and "folk" versions of stories (e.g., the treatment of the Rama story in the classical Tamil epic *Iramavataram* of Kampan, versus its raucous and often ribald exposition and staging by shadow puppeteers; cf. Blackburn 1996:22-54), domesticized portrayals are not uncommon in elite texts (e.g., the Sanskrit *purana*s). Such representation is found even in the ultra-orthodox Srivaishnava tradition of South India: e.g., that sect's largest annual festival includes a publicly-staged episode in which Lakshmi quarrels with her husband Vishnu (the Supreme Being of the Srivaishnavas) and locks him out of the house (his principal temple at Srirangam) after he has been away all day, because she suspects him of having an affair (Narayanan 1994:129-130). The "elite" versus "folk" distinction is only of limited utility here, and the cultural sense of the appropriateness of such portrayals would seem to depend heavily on the context of performance (cf. Ramanujan's argument in another essay that Indian discourse is characteristically "context-sensitive," and tends to avoid the absolutes and universals favored in Western ideology; Ramanujan 1990:47-50).

in each case are revealing of their character and function (cf. on Hanuman, Lutgendorf 1997:318-319).

The scene shifts abruptly to earth, where we witness the fulfillment of Narada's benediction through the joyous worship of Santoshi Ma by a group of singing and dancing women, led by the maiden Satyavati (Kanan Kaushal). The setting is another mythological film staple: a pastel-colored, neo-classical temple enshrining in its sanctum a brightly-painted image, here equipped with a glittering motorized halo. Everyone looks well-fed and prosperous, bedecked in bright costumes that suggest a non-specific north Indian rural setting; the Brahman priest, waving his *arti* lamp before the goddess, looks serene and ecstatic. The women's choreographed ensemble dancing is unlike anything one would see in a real temple (where worship is normally individual and idiosyncratic) —again, this is standard cinematic convention. Satyavati stands in the center of the whirling dancers and leads them in the first of the film's three catchy *bhajan*s or devotional hymns, *Main to arti utaru*, "I perform Mother Santoshi's *arti*"—referring to ceremonial worship with a tray bearing lamps, flowers, and incense.

The *darshanic* dialog during Satyavati's ecstatic worship of Santoshi Ma.

The emphasis throughout this scene is on the experience of *darshan*: of "seeing" and being seen by the goddess—the reciprocal act of "visual communion" that is central to Hindu worship (Eck 1981). The camera repeatedly zooms in on Satyavati's face and eyes, then offers a comparable point-of-view zoom shot of the goddess as Satyavati sees her. Finally, it offers a shot-reverse shot from a position just over the goddess's shoulder, thus approximating (though not directly assuming) Santoshi Ma's perspective, and closing the *darshanic* loop by showing us Satyavati and the other worshipers more or less as She sees them.

Each shot in this repeated sequence (which is intercut with other shots of the dancing women, musicians, etc.) is held for several seconds, establishing an ocular dialog that is further emphasized by the lyrics of the hymn.

Satyavati: There is great affection, great love in Mother's eyes.

Chorus: …In Mother's eyes!

Sstyavati: There is great mercy, power, and love in Mother's eyes.

Chorus: …In Mother's eyes!

Satyavati: Why shouldn't I gaze, again and again, into Mother's eyes?
Behold, at every moment, a whole new world in Mother's eyes!

Chorus: …In Mother's eyes!

Such *darshan* sequences have been standard in mythologicals since at least 1918, when Phalke's *Shri Krishna Janma* ("the birth of Lord Kirshna," one of the handful of Indian silent films of which footage survives) offered a poster-like frontal tableau of the child Krishna (played by Phalke's daughter Mandakini) dancing on a subdued serpent. This yielded to a Krishna-eye-view of the assembled crowd of worshipers, gazing at "him" in reverent awe. Such camerawork contributes to the aesthetic of "frontality" often noted in popular cinema, especially in mythologicals, which often consciously recapitulate the conventions of poster art (Kapur 1987:80; Kapur 1993:92). But its ubiquity should not obscure its significance: the camera's movements invite the viewer to assume, as it were, both positions in the act of *darshanic* intercourse, thus closing an experiential loop that ultimately moves (as most Hindu loops do) toward an underlying unity. Indeed, the face of Santoshi Ma seen in the sanctum is of a young woman who closely resembles Satyavati.

When the song ends we see Satyavati and her girlfriends leaving the temple, chatting about their requests to the goddess. When the girls ask Satyavati what she asked for, she becomes embarrassed, lowers her eyes, and quietly says, "Mother's pearl." Initially puzzled, the girls quickly divine that by this allusion (the masculine noun *moti* or "pearl" connoting something of great value) Satyavati is expressing her concern over her impending marriage prospects. A friend reassures her that "Just as Sita found Rama, so you too will get a bridegroom who pleases your heart." As the now-blushing Satyavati runs away from her friends, she collides with a handsome young man, Birju (Ashish Kumar) and their eyes meet. A quick sequence of shot-reverse and point-of-view shots recapitulates, in the context of worldly love, the *darshanic* dialog in the temple, and Satyavati's girlfriends giggle that the Mother seems to have responded quickly to her request.

This scene, with its epic reference (to Sita and Rama's romantic first encounter in a flower garden, one of the most beloved episodes in the Hindi *Ramcaritmanas* of Tulsidas), is also the first of several instances in which the heroine invokes Santoshi Ma while obliquely asserting her own desire. The next follows immediately, when she returns home to find her father, a pious brahman widower, reciting a *Ramcaritmanas* verse in which the goddess Parvati assures Sita that she will obtain her heart's wish (*Ramcaritmanas* 1.236.7). He too is preoccupied with his daughter's marriage, but when he speaks to her and finds her lost in thought, he remarks in mock exasperation, "You are really amazing!" Satyavati, still in her reverie, replies "Oh no, *he* is amazing!" When her father, taken aback, asks "*He*? Who is 'he'?," she is pulled out of her daydream to confront the embarrassment of having made a confession of love in front of her father— another traditionally unacceptable expression of agency. Yet Satyavati, glancing at the *prasad* still in her hands, rescues herself by changing the meaning of "he" to "it" (since Hindi pronouns are gender-free): "I mean…I mean, *it* is amazing! Santoshi Ma's *prasad*!" Again, the goddess here serves to deflect attention from Satyavati's budding desire, which is nevertheless clear to viewers.

Birju (r.) with his mother and Daya Ram.   The jealous sisters-in-law, Durga and Maya.

The next scene rapidly introduces Birju's prosperous family through allusions to the mythology of Krishna, for Birju (whose name is an epithet of the flute-playing god) is, like Krishna, the youngest of many sons and an artistic and restless soul, plays a bamboo flute, and is doted on by his eldest brother Daya Ram ("compassionate Ram"), a hefty farmer who Birju himself likens to Krishna's elder brother Balaram. We also meet Birju's six sisters-in-law, of whom two are singled out: Durga and Maya, both named for powerful goddesses, and clearly shrewish and annoyed with their still-unmarried and unemployed junior brother-in-law, whom they regard as lazy. The anonymous family of the *vrat katha* is thus rapidly transformed into a set of named individuals with distinct personalities and relationships to the hero. Further, it becomes plain to viewers familiar with the printed story that the mistreatment of the junior son (and later of his wife) will here be perpetrated not by his sweet-looking widowed mother (played by Leela Mishra, who made a career of such benign, white-saried roles) but by his scowling sisters-in-law. This obeys (and instructs new viewers in) what Rosie Thomas identifies as "one of the most tenacious rules of Hindi cinema," namely, "that it is 'impossible' to make a film in which a protagonist's real mother is villainous or even semivillainous…." (Thomas 1995:164).

Another rule of Hindi cinema is that there must be a fight, usually over a woman's honor, and this is provided by introducing another character unknown to the *katha*: a villain (signaled by his mustache and swarthy looks) named Banke ("twisted") who tries to rape Satyavati when she is coming home late at night from another festival at Santoshi Ma's temple (at which Birju has performed the film's second *bhajan*, "*Apni Santoshi Maa*"—"Our Santoshi Ma"). Birju hears her cries and, with the aid of his comical sidekick Tota Ram ("Ram the parrot"), beats off Banke and his henchmen, even forcing the villain to grovel at Satyavati's feet. In the process, Birju sustains a headwound, which permits Satyavati to bring him home and introduce him to her father, signaling demurely that this heroic figure is the man she loves. Later, at their lamp-lit gate, Birju too declares his love for her. The delighted pandit gives his blessing to his daughter's choice and soon proceeds to arrange the marriage, though only after Satyavati has returned alone to Santoshi Ma's temple and asked for this boon, promising a pilgrimage of thanksgiving to all the Mother's shrines. Once again, Satyavati's assumption of agency is couched within the language of self-effacing devotion.

The marriage ceremony is presented through a sequence of vignettes that recapitulate its key moments—and also its prototypical representation in such famous films as *Mother India* (1957): the circumambulation of the sacred fire, the daughter's tearful leave-taking of her childhood home, and her first steps into the household in which she will spend the rest of her life. These scenes effectively evoke the protocols of a rural Indian wedding, with special sensitivity to the viewpoint of the *bahu* or new bride: as the men and women in Birju's family repair to separate sections of the compound, Satyavati is left with her new sisters-in-law. Durga and Maya simmer with jealousy at seeing their "worthless" brother-in-law achieve a love-match with a young woman whose beauty is praised by all. They contrive a frighteningly inauspicious welcome at the gate of the house, and then complain within earshot of Satyavati that she has "stolen" their own wedding ornaments. Satyavati's vulnerability and fear is painfully apparent throughout this sequence. Though the women's malice is exaggerated, the types of teasing depicted (including booby-trapping the decorated nuptial bed) are common enough. This may not be every woman's experience, but it is shared by enough women —friends, daughters, neighbors—to resonate with female viewers.

In the next scene, Birju's brothers force him to join them in the fields while Satyavati grinds wheat at home. Overcome by desire for his bride, Birju runs home and, despite the women's taunts at his "shameless" behavior, pulls Satyavati into their bedroom. His wife's response suggests both her pleasure at his attention and her worry over her in-laws' disapproval, the brunt of which she will have to bear. As Birju romances her, she surprises him by invoking their patron deity.

> Birju: It's only you whom my eyes behold, here, there, everywhere!
>
> Satyavati: Me?
>
> Birju: Yes.
>
> Satyavati: (coyly shaking her head) No, there's but one form everywhere.
>
> Birju: What form?
>
> Satyavati: Like you sang that day: "Here, there, everywhere, why ask where She is…our Santoshi Ma!"
>
> Birju: (taken aback) Santoshi Ma?
>
> Satyavati: Yes, before our marriage I made a vow at Mother's feet.
>
> Birju: Vow? What vow?
>
> Satyavati: That after obtaining you, I would take Mother's *darshan* in her temples.
>
> Birju: (smiling) Oh, is this your vow?

Despite its pious language, the scene maintains a coyly amorous tone: Satyavati is revealing an intimate secret to her beloved, and it pleases them both. This is underscored by what immediately follows: a reprise of Birju's earlier *bhajan*, now accompanying footage of the couple on pilgrimage, taking *darshan* at each of five temples. This type of musical sequence, showing an exotic geography and suggesting, through changes of

costume, both lapse of time and material abundance, is common in Hindi films. Its associations are with romance, not devotion, but it is here skillfully used to convey both.

Birju and Satyavati enjoy a devotional "honeymoon."

The refrain of Birju's song, heard while the couple walk along the riverbank in a pilgrimage city,

> She's here, there, everywhere — don't ask where she is! — our Santoshi Ma!

now seems less a theological assertion than an invocation of the joy and freedom of travel —which for many Indians, combines equal measures of pilgrimage and tourism. Whereas big budget "social" films may whisk their lovers off to Kashmir or Switzerland for a romantic song sequence, Sharma sticks closer to home but achieves the same purpose. Satyavati appears in different saris at successive temples, and she and Birju gaze reverently at each image of the Mother, then turn to look adoringly at one another. They are plainly on an extended, private vacation. Once again, by blamelessly invoking the goddess, Satyavati has achieved what many a young Indian wife would most like (and many middle class women increasingly enjoy, as "honeymoons" have come into fashion): time alone with her new husband, free from the censuring looks and ceaseless demands of his family members.

This rapturous interlude is followed by a return to the world of the gods, and the introduction of a dramatic plot twist unknown to the *katha* pamphlets: Narada inciting the jealously of Lakshmi, Parvati, and Brahmani—the wives of the so-called "Hindu trinity" of Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma—toward Santoshi Ma, and anger at her devotee.[12] The setting is Vaikunth Lok, the heaven of Vishnu, here imagined as an opulent celestial home strewn with couches and pillows. The goddesses are heavily-adorned housewives, and their dialog is deliciously witty.

> Lakshmi: (to maidservant, after noticing empty throne-couch) Where has the Master of Vaikunth gone?

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[12] Brahma's wife is also known as Sarasvati and is worshiped as the patron of art and learning. The name change here is indicative of the film's disinterest in the usual attributes of these goddesses, and its stress instead on their wifely roles as established matrons of divine households.

Maidservant: Don't know.
Parvati: (entering through doorway and looking around tentatively) Sister Lakshmi….?
Lakshmi: (visibly pleased) Parvati! Come in, Sister. (Parvati approaches) Today you've come from Kailash [Shiva's heaven] after a long time.
Parvati: What can I do, Lakshmi? I'm kept so busy serving Bholenath [Shiva], I don't get any leisure. Today he went out somewhere, so I came right over! But I don't see your Narayan around either.
Lakshmi: (petulantly) Yes, he also took off early this morning, without saying anything.
Brahmani: (entering through doorway) Men are all the same! Brahma-ji also took off without so much as a word to me.
Parvati: Never mind, Brahmani. (smiling) This gives us all an excuse to get together.

At this point Narada enters. While praising the three goddesses, he notes with mock dismay that people on earth no longer seem interested in worshiping them—they have found "some other" goddess. Here again, the film plays on viewers' awareness of the relative novelty of Santoshi Ma's cult, for the goddesses have clearly never heard of her. Their angry response indicates that they consider her to be an upstart and usurper. When Narada adds that Satyavati, a faithful wife, is the "exemplary devotee" of the goddess and tirelessly serves holy men, the three are further enraged.