

Indian Cinema and the Reconstruction of Mythical Women: Gender, Identity, and Cultural Discourse

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Abstract: Indian cinema has long served as a powerful site for the construction, negotiation, and contestation of female identity through mythological frameworks. This paper examines how Hindi and regional Indian cinemas reconstruct mythical women, analyzing the intersection of gender, identity, and cultural discourse in cinematic narratives. Drawing on feminist film theory, cultural studies, and mythological analysis, the study explores how films deploy archetypal figures—the sati, virangana, yakshi, and goddess—to articulate nationalist, patriarchal, and occasionally subversive gendered discourses. Through critical analysis of contemporary mythohistorical films like *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Manikarnika* (2019), horror narratives invoking the yakshi tradition, and films that both reify and destabilize goddess iconography, the paper argues that cinema's reconstruction of mythical women operates within a paradox: women are exalted to celestial heights yet often denied substantive agency. This dynamic reflects what Partha Chatterjee identified as the "nationalist resolution of the women's question," wherein the symbolic feminine becomes the marker of cultural authenticity while material gender relations remain largely untouched. However, recent films such as *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* (2025) and *Kahaani* (2012) suggest emergent possibilities for subverting these archetypes. The paper concludes that while mythic framing remains a culturally resonant mode of representing female power, genuine feminist transformation requires moving beyond deification toward recognising women as complex, flawed, and self-determining individuals.

Keywords: Indian cinema, mythology, gender, female archetypes, sati, yakshi, cultural nationalism, feminist film theory

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Indian cinema and mythology is neither incidental nor superficial. From its earliest days, Indian cinema has drawn deeply from the vast reservoir of Hindu mythological narratives, not merely as source material but as a foundational grammar for constructing meaning, morality, and identity. Mythological films, devotional cinema, and, more recently, mythohistorical blockbusters have consistently turned to divine and legendary female figures to articulate cultural values, nationalist aspirations, and gendered ideals. Yet the cinematic reconstruction of mythical women is fraught with contradiction. Women are simultaneously worshipped as goddesses and constrained by patriarchal norms; celebrated as embodiments of *shakti* (divine power) yet denied the mundane agency of ordinary personhood.

The term "woman myth" captures this double-edged dynamic: it refers both to the mythological baggage attached to female identity and the idealised attributes—chastity, sacrifice, devotion, purity—that define the "ideal" Indian woman across generations. Contemporary cinema, even as it presents empowered female protagonists, often resurrects these older templates, embedding references to goddesses like Durga and Kali within narratives of female vengeance or justice. The empowered woman becomes a *shakti* figure, her power legitimated by divine rather than human origins.

This paper analyses how Indian cinema reconstructs mythical women across three interconnected domains: the mythohistorical film, where legendary queens become symbols of national honour; the horror genre, where the *yakshi* (female spirit) embodies cultural anxieties about female desire and agency; and films that invoke goddess

iconography to frame female empowerment. Drawing on the conceptual framework of the "mythohistorical" proposed by Rituparna Sengupta, alongside feminist scholarship on myth and representation, the paper argues that cinema's mythic reconstruction of women serves as a primary vehicle for negotiating gender, identity, and cultural discourse in contemporary India.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Myth, Gender, and Cinema

The study of myth and cinema in the Indian context rests on several foundational premises. First, in Hindu tradition, myths are not mere fairy tales but "the way in which people humanize the gap visible in the world"—a neutral and stable point of transition between the known and the unknown. Myth serves a communicative function, capable of performing historical, social, political, and even therapeutic roles. It acts as a "guide" for normative behaviour, and because it is embedded in religion and ritual, it carries powerful legitimising force.

Rachel Dwyer's observation that "film creates new mythologies" is particularly significant. Cinema does not simply reproduce existing myths; it actively reworks, recontextualises, and sometimes subverts them. Indian cinema's evolution has a "direct connection with mythology and social drama," which later lent itself to symbolising political rhetoric and action. In this sense, cinematic myth-making is never neutral—it is always implicated in contemporary ideological projects.

The figure of the Indian woman in cinema has been shaped by what Jyotika Viridi and others describe as a "Victorian Brahminical beauty" ideal, embodying attributes of chastity, virginity, and goddess-like purity. These prescribed characteristics—the *pativrata* (devoted wife), *sati* (virtuous woman), and the chaste, docile young woman—have their roots in Hindu mythological exemplars like Sita, Savitri, and Sati herself, whose narratives continue to shape gendered expectations in everyday life.

2.2 The Mythohistorical Framework: Sati, Virangana, and Cultural Nationalism

Rituparna Sengupta's concept of the "mythohistorical" provides a crucial analytical lens for understanding contemporary cinematic reconstructions of mythical women. Mythohistorical films combine mythology and history to create a "common visual network of assumptions" in which the nation is depicted as an organic, ahistorical entity sanctified by Hindu religious symbolism. Central to this imagination is the "demarcation of the symbolic borders of the nation through the body of the Kshatriya (warrior-caste) woman," particularly through the archetypes of *sati* and *virangana* (warrior woman).

The *sati*—the woman who immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre—has been a figure of intense debate since the colonial period. Nineteenth-century reformers and nationalists clashed over the practice, with nationalists often defending it as a marker of Hindu spiritual superiority. Contemporary mythohistorical films like *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Manikarnika* (2019), Sengupta argues, revitalise these narratives and present them "as female self-empowerment," suggesting a "new twenty-first-century 'nationalist resolution of the women's question'" (after Partha Chatterjee). The female protagonist, through her sacrifice or martial valour, comes to symbolise "the nation's inviolable spiritual essence".

This framing is particularly significant because it co-opts feminist language of empowerment while reinforcing profoundly patriarchal structures. The female body becomes the symbolic boundary of the nation, and female agency is legitimate only when it serves national or communal honour.

2.3 The Yakshi and the Possessed Female Body

The *yakshi* figure offers a different but equally revealing dimension of how mythical women are reconstructed in Indian cinema. Rooted in folklore and Puranic texts, the *yakshi* is a female spirit, often vengeful or seductive, who embodies cultural fears and desires associated with female sexuality, agency, and transgression.

Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K. Suresh describe the "Yakshi syndrome" as a "unique culture-bound syndrome rooted in Indian popular imagination where a possessed female body is perceived as a manifestation of desires and fears associated with communities defined by local myths, religious superstitions, and regional fantasies". In Malayalam

cinema, they argue, the *yakshi* is visualized "within a morally conservative cultural past and patriarchal structure that use the phenomenon of spirit possession to mask somatic and psychological symptoms related to the mental health of women". The *yakshi* possession destroys identity and agency, reducing the female self to "a deviant stock figure" whose soul must be ritually redeemed through exorcism performed by men.

This pattern extends beyond Malayalam cinema. Hindi and Telugu horror films frequently draw on Puranic lore for their female ghost narratives, with figures like Saakini and Daakini, or the woman in a white saree appearing at midnight, all originating "from myths deeply ingrained in our culture". The female ghost, as industry figures acknowledge, ensures better audience connect because "there's a direct connection between myth and reality in the case of female-centric horror".

However, the *yakshi* figure has also become a site of feminist subversion. The 2025 Malayalam film *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra*, directed by Dominic Arun, transforms the traditional *yakshi* imagery, reframing her as a "vampiric creature with superpowers and a heart in the right place" rather than a malevolent seductress. The film, which marks "the first Indian female superhero in films," attempts to subvert the portrayal of the *yakshi* by giving her agency and a moral purpose. Yet even here, critics note that the *yakshi-vampire* crossover superimposes Western vampire tropes onto the indigenous figure, raising questions about cultural authenticity and the limits of subversion.

2.4 The Goddess Figure: Worship, Sacrifice, and Silencing

Perhaps the most pervasive mythical reconstruction is that of the goddess figure herself. Cinema has long drawn on goddess iconography—Durga, Kali, Santoshi Maa—to frame narratives of female power, sacrifice, and endurance. The paradox is that "while cinema elevates women to celestial heights, their agency often remains curtailed. The woman is revered, never heard. Worshipped, seldom allowed voice".

Satyajit Ray's *Devi* (1960) remains the most searing exploration of this paradox. The young bride Doyamoyee is declared an incarnation of the goddess by her father-in-law, and her identity is systematically erased as she is forced into divine performance. The film is "a searing commentary on how society turns women into goddesses only to destroy them". Similarly, the devotional blockbuster *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975), while transforming an obscure goddess into a household name, "reaffirmed archaic concepts of the selfless, submissive, and sacrificial woman. Agency got surrendered at the altar of endurance".

The goddess figure is also strategically deployed in films that appear to offer feminist narratives. Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani* (2012), set against the backdrop of Durga Puja, culminates in the protagonist Vidya Bagchi transforming into a vengeful Durga figure. While celebrated as a breakthrough in female agency, critics note that "the woman's power had to be framed within a divine archetype. While she seizes control, her triumph is still narrated in mythic terms". This suggests that cinema, reflecting society, struggles to accept women as "independent individuals outside archetypes".

Uma Maheswari Bhargubanda's analysis of Telugu devotional cinema examines this tension through the figures of *sati* (the good wife) and *shakti* (the goddess). She argues that these two figures have been central to the Telugu devotional genre, with the goddess in her fierce aspects often dismissed as "a sign of primitive nature" associated with lower castes, while the *sati* figure provides the model for "imagining the ethics of good wifehood". However, later decades saw shifts, with lower caste village goddesses beginning to appear, suggesting the ongoing contestation of these archetypes.

III. ANALYSIS: CINEMATIC RECONSTRUCTIONS OF MYTHICAL WOMEN

3.1 Mythohistorical Cinema: Padmaavat and Manikarnika

Padmaavat (2018) and *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019) exemplify the mythohistorical mode and its gendered politics. Both films adapt legends of Hindu queens, presenting them as symbols of national honour and female valour. The female protagonists, Padmavati and Rani Lakshmibai, are reconstructed not merely as historical figures but as mythic archetypes—the *sati* who immolates herself to preserve honour, and the *virangana* who fights on the battlefield carrying her child on her back.

Sengupta's analysis is particularly insightful regarding the framing of *jauhar* (mass self-immolation) in *Padmaavat*. The film's presentation of this practice as an act of female empowerment, rather than patriarchal violence, represents "the revitalisation of these narratives and their presentation as female self-empowerment in globalised India". This is not simply a cinematic choice but reflects a broader cultural-nationalist discourse that infuses "Hindu mythology with cultural nationalism to offer an 'authentic' history of the nation".

Manikarnika similarly reconstructs the Rani of Jhansi within mythic parameters. The queen is shown fighting on the battlefield, carrying her child on her back—a visual that, as one critic notes, uses the child as "an added burden, used to show how the physically strong woman is still a mother, fulfilling her duties". The archetypical "feminine strength" is re-valourised, but only in a manner that reinforces traditional expectations. The queen's heroism is legitimate because it serves the nation-state, not because it challenges patriarchal structures.

3.2 The Yakshi in Contemporary Cinema

The *yakshi* figure provides a second, contrasting mode of reconstruction. In films like *Stree* (2018) and its sequel, and the Malayalam *Lokah* (2025), the vengeful female spirit becomes a vehicle for exploring gender anxieties and, in some cases, offering critiques of patriarchy.

In *Stree 2*, the audience's connection to the film's mythology is explicitly rooted in belief—"the audience believed the wordings like 'Vo Aayegi' on the wall and connected to women being abducted by a headless creature in a small town". The film taps into a deep cultural well of local legends about women meeting violent fates, transforming them into sources of horror. Producer Anil Sunkara explains the strategy: "We blended mythology with ghost elements to strike a chord with the masses. Our story connects to the Garuda Purana, which explains why certain spirits linger after death and how vengeance remains unresolved".

Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra represents an ambitious attempt to subvert this tradition. The *yakshi*, usually portrayed as "a malevolent seductress, one who uses her sexual charms to lure men to their deaths," is reframed as "a vampiric creature with superpowers and a heart in the right place". The protagonist, Chandra, is "beautiful and has an air of mysterious sexiness, but she is not trying to seduce anyone". The film also inverts the hero-saving-heroine trope and gives brief moments of agency to minor female characters.

Yet the subversion is incomplete. The *yakshi* narrative arc "sticks to the sequences found in most other superhero action films—confronting evil and protecting loved ones". Moreover, the *yakshi-vampire* crossover conflates culturally distinct mythic traditions. Chandra's aversion to sunlight, need for blood, and need for permission to enter rooms are "vampiric traits that get superimposed on the yakshi". This raises questions about whether the film genuinely reimagines the *yakshi* or merely replaces one set of archetypal constraints with another.

3.3 Subversion and Its Limits: Rajkahini and Feminist Disruptions

Between the polarities of mythohistorical glorification and subversive reimagining lie films that destabilise mythic archetypes through critical engagement. Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini* (2015), set during the Partition of Bengal, exemplifies this approach. The film represents "the partitioned female body as both a material archive and an anti-epic symbol" through costumes, props, and mythic imagery. Sarees, stains, and jewellery serve as "living testimonies of violence, survival, and relationship," while the film's silence regarding menstruation and sanitation highlights "the gendered omissions of partition experiences".

Crucially, *Rajkahini* destabilises archetypes of the goddess, queen, and begum. The narrative "questions nationalist-sacrificial motifs and instead highlights fragmented, resistant female subjectivities". By tracing "the intersection of material culture and myth," the analysis argues that "objects pull women from mythic abstraction into embodied histories". This represents a more thoroughgoing critique than either the glorification of the *virangana* or the heroisation of the *yakshi*, as it refuses the comfort of mythic framing altogether.

3.4 Deification and the Everyday: Devi, Jai Santoshi Maa, and Utsab

The persistence of deification as a cinematic mode reveals much about the cultural work myths perform. Satyajit Ray's *Devi* remains the definitive critique: Doyamoyee's deification is shown as tragedy, not triumph. When faith in her

divinity costs a child's life, Ray exposes how "society turns women into goddesses only to destroy them". The film's power lies in refusing to romanticise divine framing.

Jai Santoshi Maa and films of its kind operate very differently. By turning cinema halls into temples, the film mobilised the goddess figure to reinforce "archaic concepts of the selfless, submissive, and sacrificial woman". The goddess's worship was predicated on female patience and endurance, not on female aspiration or independence.

Rituparno Ghosh's *Utsab* (2000) occupies an intermediate position. The Puja backdrop becomes a context for exploring "betrayal, compromise, and longing" in an ancestral home. The women in *Utsab* "remain caught between tradition and transformation. The ritual of worship frames them, but does not free them". Ghosh's implicit question—"what does it mean for women to be symbolically worshipped for five days, if not given agency over their own life?"—haunts the narrative without offering easy answers.

IV. DISCUSSION: THE POLITICS OF RECONSTRUCTION

4.1 The Paradox of Empowerment

The cinematic reconstruction of mythical women operates within a persistent paradox: women are empowered only when their power is framed in mythic, divine, or sacrificial terms. The "empowered" heroine of mythohistorical cinema—whether Padmavati, Manikarnika, or the *yakshi*-superhero—gains agency only by serving a larger national, communal, or narrative purpose. She is never simply a woman with ordinary desires, flaws, and contradictions. This reflects what Mashaekh Hassan terms "gold-washing"—the process of polishing the Bollywood heroine to an unrealistic, mythic standard that invalidates the struggles of ordinary women.

The choice of divine framing is significant. As Bhrugubanda notes, the goddess in her fierce aspects is often dismissed as "a sign of primitive nature" associated with lower castes, while the *sati* figure provides the model for "good wifedom". This hierarchy of female archetypes reveals the class and caste dimensions of the "woman myth." The goddess who is worshipped by upper-caste elites is domesticated; the fierce goddess of the lower castes is marginalised.

4.2 The Gendered Nation and the Symbolic Feminine

The mythohistorical films analysed by Sengupta demonstrate the intimate connection between cinematic reconstructions of mythical women and the project of cultural nationalism. The female body becomes the symbolic boundary of the nation, and her virtue or sacrifice defines the nation's spiritual essence. This dynamic echoes Partha Chatterjee's argument about the "women's question" in nationalism: women were assigned the task of preserving cultural authenticity while men engaged with the material and political world.

The twenty-first-century "nationalist resolution" identified by Sengupta presents this symbolic framing as female empowerment, co-opting feminist language while reinforcing patriarchal structures. The *virangana* (warrior woman) may fight on the battlefield, but she fights for a nation defined by Hindu nationalist terms, and her agency is legitimate only insofar as it serves that project. This is not feminist liberation but a new form of containment.

4.3 The Limits of Subversion

Even films that seek to subvert mythical archetypes often remain entangled with them. *Lokah's yakshi*-superhero is celebrated for giving the female spirit agency, yet her narrative arc mirrors Western superhero templates, and her identity is shaped by *yakshi* mythology even as it departs from it. The question, as Deepti Komalam asks, is whether such confluences represent genuine subversion or simply a repackaging of the mythic feminine for global audiences.

Similarly, *Kahaani's* use of Durga iconography to frame a story of female vengeance has been praised for its feminist politics. Yet the goddess framing is also a limitation: Vidya Bagchi's power becomes meaningful because it is legible through mythic categories. Her agency is divine, not human; exceptional, not ordinary. This suggests that cinema, reflecting a broader cultural hesitancy, struggles to accept women as "complex, flawed and self-determining".

4.4 Moving Beyond Deification

Contemporary films like *Thappad* (2020) and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) suggest a possible way forward. They "resist mythic framing altogether", instead centring on the everyday struggles of ordinary women: a housewife who

leaves her husband after a single act of violence, or a woman trapped in the suffocating domestic labour of a patriarchal household. These films do not need goddesses or ghosts to make their point; they let the mundane be enough. This does not mean cinema should abandon myth entirely. Myth and metaphor will always have a place in storytelling. The real challenge, as the Times Now analysis concludes, is "whether cinema can move beyond deification to allow women to exist as flawed, desiring contradictory individuals. Power does not always need the stamp of divinity". Agency is most radical when it belongs not to the divine, but to the woman herself.

V. CONCLUSION

Indian cinema's reconstruction of mythical women is a complex, often contradictory cultural project. Mythological and mythohistorical films deploy female archetypes—the *sati*, *virangana*, *yakshi*, and goddess—to articulate nationalist aspirations, reinforce patriarchal norms, and occasionally offer subversive possibilities. The figure of the mythical woman is a site of intense ideological contestation, where questions of gender, identity, and cultural authenticity are negotiated on screen.

The analysis demonstrates three key findings. First, mythohistorical cinema reconstructs legendary women as symbols of national honour, presenting sacrifice and martial valour as female empowerment while reinforcing nationalist and patriarchal frameworks. Second, the *yakshi* figure embodies cultural anxieties about female desire and transgression, though recent films like *Lokah* attempt subversion. Third, goddess iconography is deployed to frame female power, but this framing often limits agency by locating it in the divine rather than the human.

The persistence of mythic framing reflects what Partha Chatterjee identified as the "nationalist resolution of the women's question"—the assignment of the symbolic feminine to the realm of culture and spirituality while the material realm of politics and economy remains male-dominated. Cinema, as a mass medium, participates in and reinforces this resolution, even as it sometimes offers glimpses of alternatives.

The path forward lies not in abandoning myth but in recognising its limitations. As the success of films like *Thappad* and *The Great Indian Kitchen* suggests, audiences are ready for narratives that acknowledge women as complex, flawed, and self-determining. The challenge for Indian cinema is to allow women to exist beyond the pedestal—not as goddesses to be worshipped or spirits to be feared, but as human beings with agency that requires no mythic justification.

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