Film Appreciation
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Lecture - 31
Mythological Cinema in India

Good morning. So, we have been talking about the history of Hindi films, and today I will be talking about mythological films especially, in Indian cinema as well as Hindi films. So, some of the mythological, as you know one some is in Marathi, the early ones I am talking about. So, it is against this back draw that we are going to talk about; the history and evolution of mythological films in India. Now, Hollywood has been making these great period pieces, costume drama and mythological films for a long time..

So, as late as very recently, you have had Russell Crowe, playing nova. So, that is a biblical picture. Now, earlier also, you are familiar with the great mythological films, which are also religious epics, such as Ten Commandments, Sign of the Cross and Banhar. So, what I am trying to say here is that mythological have been a very established genre in Hollywood as well as in India. Interestingly, while when we talk about the Sign of the Cross, and when we talk about Banhar and Ten Commandments and also, Russell Crowes doing Russell Crowe doing nova..

So, you may note that these are extremely, big budget films; big directors and also, mega stars. The major point of difference between mythological in Hollywood and mythological in India is this; that in India, we do not have this culture, even today. So, the culture I am talking about this; big stars, big budget and big producers or studios of big directors, backing up a mythological film. Mythological, as a genre and it is a genre. It always had the tag of a B picture; B picture is something, that is not the A list movie. See, in cinema we talk about the A list films, which star the top actors, directed by top directors and are lavishly mounted. So, that is an A picture for us. B picture is, and there is another difference; A picture is supposedly, may to cater to an elated, educated and more urban kind of an audience, also NRIs. That is not the case with the B picture; it is a very complex category of films. Even in Hollywood, we have big pictures B pictures,, but their B, is very different from what we consider as B pictures..

We also have genre of kel cinema,, but then also there is a huge difference between what

they consider kald and what we consider kald. At this point, I would like you to draw your attention to the very first mythological film from India, which is also our first ever movie, Raja Harishchandran; please not the link. Mythological films play attention between myth and realism. As we all know that realism is something true to live and myth is something, which is talked about, which is, which may or may not be accurate, historically accurate. That is the difference between myth and realism, and mythological have to tread a thin line between the two constructs. Mythological films, along with devotional films and historical films, do not just show literal representation of religions, communities and believes,, but are also grounded in wider customs and concerns of society and these concerns are religious..

Mythological attempt to transforms the myth on the screen with the use of images, icons and symbols and special effects, and thus they make it easy for cinema to be mobilized by us. Some of the most successful films, all times successful films, in Hindi are, and I am talk about mythological so, Sampoorna Ramayana, which is a 60s film,, but even earlier, we had films such as Bhaktha Prahlad and Keechaka Vadham. We also have Shiv Mahima, Lovegosh, Bharath Milaab and Mahabharatha. So, I am not talking about the TV show. I am not talking about B.R. Chopra's Mahabharatha. I am talking about the film Mahabharatha, and there have been several versions of Ramayana. You might know, it may be perhaps, in a very instructive to understand that Shogna Samarth, Noothans mother, was extremely adapt and was well known at playing mythological characters..

She reprise the role of Seetha in a number of films, based on Ramayana. So, Ramayana has been made and remade several times, of course,, considering the importance that the epic holds in our culture; it is not surprising. While myths may be regarded as abstract ideas in India; they held a very real existence. There was a clear distinction between, made between materiel and real. The question of a purely material existence, behind the form is unimportant, because in traditional Indian art as opposed to the academic and scientifically aware, posra nice are Europe the form is seen in the mind; not in reality. This is something we have to understand..

I am quoting the critic of Chudanadas Gupta, where he says in India, mythology often borders around history, social history at any rate; hence the renewed material consciousness of today, can find inspiration in mythological themes. Therefore, myths and mythological films play an important role in Indian political project, which tries to present itself as ancient civilization, rich in culture. So, it is not just a social cultural

constrict; it also has its roots in shaping or it also has a very strong role in shaping the politics of our times. The role of myth is almost a counter to the foreign, western education. In India, the mythological cinema genres are coming together, multiple forms of art such as painting, storytelling, theater, folk tale and dramas, in order to a narrate our films..

So, all these arts came together to construct a story. As we have been talking about, the first ever film was Raja Harishchandran, released in 1930, directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. Now, India struggles, initially struggles for the film makers, included the inability to get women to act in their film. So, there were times when we, film makers are forced to cast as a minute men to play the parts of women. There was a need to import expensive machine from abroad, which would often delay films. So, we are talking about the struggles that early film makers put up with, especially, while making mythologies, mythological and many films made during the earlier period were mythological.

Following that period, most film that came out in the early 20s, and during the inception years of cinema were mythological, because one important reason; they were commercially very successful, because of their universal appeal. Part of the appeal of mythological films to Indian cinemas' early audience was that unlike before, where Gods and Goddesses and their acts were performed in their mind. Cinema now, gave life to the imagination; this imagination, gave, took shape and form, and that became crystallized. So, for the first time, you know, audiences could see Gods, flying across space, performing magic on a screen, punish evil, rewarded good, etc. and that also said that template for good versus evil theme of our films, which remained constant for a very long time to come.

Another reason that can explain the success of mythological films way into the post independence era is that while mainstream films are associated with the tasteless and entertainment; mythological films provide an escape and space, where the focus is shifted to deeds, performed by gods and not the actor themselves. It would be very interesting to note that many actors became familiar to the audience and in the audiences mind as Gods themselves. You may recall that when Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana was shot and was in screen, during the late 80s, many of the starts were actually, taken as incarnation the Gods themselves. So, such is the importance of these epics and the mythological.

So, they are not to be taken very lightly; although, as I said very curiously, very peculiarly, no one has ever attempted a very lavish or very extravagant kind of a mythological on Indian screen till date, especially, not in Hindi films. There is also another reason for the universal appeal of mythological, and which is that these are usually, considered as family films that can be watched by entire family, including women and children. Now, as opposed to traditional folk theater, the illusion came to life far more vividly than on demon's stage. Even for the urban audience, seeing Gods on a screen was a vehicle for certainly influencing their belief in the Gods themselves; something that was, that is actually unimaginable in the west.

It is said that people even called Prem Adhi, who played Ram in Harishchandra, was called by many to his home and worshiped with flowers. During the 19th century puranas, the Ramayana and Mahabharath became foundational to new theater tradition in India, which then went on to influence regional films. Surabhi theater group in Andhra Pradesh, which successfully imbibed Harikatha tradition and Marathi sangeet natak and Parsi theater that were critical in producing many artists and writers are some examples of theater groups that impacted local cinema. The very need for an additional dimension to the communicative arts can be traced by to the industrial revoltion, modern technology urbanization, high mobility and rapid communication, introduced a whole new set of sight, sound, symbols and the material interrelationships, which demanded interpretation, but far from inducing a modern skeptical secularist spirit, the mythological genre gave access for the Hindu pantheon to this powerful instrument of believes.

Part of the political success attributed to regional leaders in our country, is also attributed to the characters they played in some of these mythological, and they became larger than life in the popular imagination. Cinema was thus, used as a tool to induce the divinity and also, it is interesting to note that states that achieved high literacy rates and went through Marxist politically structured eras have significantly, less devotional mythological films and this is important to note. So many scholars have also noticed that the films, these mythological films might have veiled political connotations that under the strict censorship of British authorities. Ancient stories of demon slaying heroes could serve as allegorical critics of the colonial Raj. This is supported by even the Dada Saheb Phalke in 1919 in his Sarandhari about the dishonor of Draupadi. It is set to be an allegorical representation of critic of viceroy, Lord `cousin(refer time: 14:37).

So, such narrative familiarity was relied on whenever, a new technology was introduced,

which explains the brief resurgence of mythological in the early sound era; this argument may be further expanded to television viewing in the 1980s, which received a boost from phenomenally, popular real serialized versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These are the most successful examples of television series, ever on Indian screen. Now, there is another. The mythological have been more or less, quite successful in India, especially, in talking about Hindi films in the smaller towns and in rural areas, but there is one exception, where which attained a pan India, Indian success to a very; you know, fantastic degree, and this film is called Jai Santhoshi Maa. This was a surprised hit of the 70s. The mega success of Jai Santhoshi Maa is all the more interesting, because it came at the same time as Sholay and Deewar films that had high gloss, big budgets and plenty of action.

These films also star the great super star Amitabh Bachchan and the fact that Jai Santhoshi Maa became such a big blog buster and Sholay and Deewar were running, is astonishing in itself. Now, we know that religious films are considered as B films and this fact was established very clearly, by the late 50s. None of the big actors pointed to act in really, these films. Apart from the early silent films, there were hardly any mythological that were directed by top directors or stared, big stars. The many of these films relied on the special effects such as thunder lightning and hurtling, hurling tridance. Jai Santhoshi Maa's plot is based on the clash of deities. It had a chart busting music and is sung on religious occasions even today.

It is interesting to note that the Goddess , the titular(refer time: 17:10) Goddess herself, was not a very well known Goddess, till the movie came into being and that is also, very interesting sub plot of the clash of the deities and family drama. So, two major elements happening in Jai Santhoshi Maa; a woman lose in the love of her husband. She is oppressed and harassed by her in laws and then, she is a devout, stanch devotee of Santhoshi Matha. This leads to jealousy of other major Goddesses; a very interesting plot; although, the production values are not that high, but still the film remains a classic.

Here is a sequence from the film; please watch it and then, will continue. All the films that are directly mythological, may have reduced. The influence of myths and mythological have persisted even during post liberalization modernized India. These films produce convenient archetypes for characters and playing to existing social role models; characters like Sita, Draupadi, Arjun. They play into convenient patriotically, structures of how, you know, people should behave or characters should behave on a

screen. So, many of our screen characters are somehow, archetypal representatives of the mythological characters; although, we may not be watching mythological for sake.

So, this may account that we afford the fact that we were not be making mythological, but our characters are archetypes of mythological characters. So, this may account for the fact that why we don't make mythological on a big screen. Even if you think of a movie like Kabhi Kushee Kabhi Gum, and it has all the tropes of an idealized family, which half backs to our epics. Now similarly, characters such as lord Krishna as the righteous character and Laxman as the loyal brother and Ravana is the epitome of evil and desire; all these characters, they produce fodder for script writers. Myths also have their share of gray characters, such as Karna, and Karna is again, an extremely popular character and he has, the character has been given different dimensions by our screen writers on screen.

Again, think of movies such as Manirathnam's Thalapathy and Prakash Hasraj Nidhi; both these films, blog busters. They have heavily borrowed from the Mahabharatha. So, myths and epics and mythological exist around us all the time. Mythological, as we know, are still a very popular genres in Indian television and ((refer time: 20:26) to mythological, we also have another sub category; that is devotional films based on the lives of Hindu saints. Now, Sant Tukaram was one of the premier films, made in 1936. Tukaram was a 17th century poet, saint and singer, who is popular in Maharashtra. So, this Marathi film received the award for the best film at the Winners (refer time: 20:50) film festival in 1937. The directors, Vishnupant damle and Shaykh Fadhlalla, made two more similar films, Sant Dhyaneshwar and Gopala Krishna.

In the 1939, Sant Tulsidas was another more film, based on the life of the 16th century poet saint. Shirdi ka Saibaba is a super hit 1977 film, staring big stars such as Manoj Kumar, Rajendra Kumar and Hemamalini. These devotional mythological films are still, popular particularly, in regional films and also on television. So, this is one very important to genre that exists in our cinema that needs, definitely, needs more attention and exploration.

Thank you very much. We will meet for our next class.