



Echoes of Myth and Memory: Cinematic Portrayals of Indian Folk Culture through Folklore Narratives.

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ABSTRACT

India is renowned for its incredible culture and heritage. The people of India are gifted with generational stories that hold our entire community and culture together. To pass on their stories, they choose various media, such as folklore, folktales, and folk dance. Folklore is an oral and scripted representation of the myths, songs, and stories that float around in communities from one generation to the next. By interacting with folklore, films not only entertain but serve as cultural archives: they help record memory and identity, and link myths about the past with ideals about the present. Nowadays, we use Indian cinemas too as a medium to represent our folk culture. We know Cinema, as India's dominant contemporary art form, has dipped heavily into this oral wellspring to narrate and re-narrate ancient stories. Indian cinema continually reinvents and presents folk culture through cinematic adaptations of folklore and mythology, so all generations understand and accept it. This article explores how folklore shapes the stories, visual styles, and cultural themes found in these films. By analysing storytelling methods, symbols, and mythic elements, the research explains how folklore preserves Indian cultural



memory and links it to modern social issues. It elaborates on the complex connection between myth and folklore, and Indian cinema through specific reference to a selection of ten films: Nagamandala (1997), Paheli (2005), Kumari (2022), Bulbbul (2020), Bhramayugam (2024), and Tumbbad (2018). All such films illustrate how folklore not only participates in cinematic aesthetics but also opens up into social consciousness. It explains the community of India, and also presents how myth and folklore are mixed in our blood. The best source to explain folk culture is cinema because it's an audio-visual medium that captures the minds of the audience.

Introduction

India is commonly referred to as a civilization of stories and a nation of storytellers. From the great epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata to local legends, folk ballads, and oral lore, stories serve as carriers of identity, morality, and spirituality. Folklore is not classical literature; it's material that has grown from people and their lives, rituals, and struggles. Andian myths infuse these stories with a cosmological perspective, relating everyday occurrences to the sacred order.

Cinema, a 20th-century invention, has become one of the ways to collect and save those older traditions. Movies that featured folklore are cultural bridges that allow myths to flourish in modern imagination, interpreted through the prism of today's experience. It is the purpose of this article to suggest that Indian cinema has become a new folklore medium conveying a common pool of collective memory in terms of sound, image, and story. It is a journey of folk culture through folklore from the silver courtyard of the village to the big screen. It covers human life and its life issues with some suggestions to overcome them.

Films chosen span languages, regions, and genres, which provide a panorama of folk-myth interplay and its cinematic expression. Myths, legends, and folklore have long shaped Indian culture, passing down social, ethical, and spiritual lessons that have been passed down through generations. These stories reflect the values and memories of communities, sharing human experiences and moral questions. Today, cinema draws on these traditions, turning them into visual stories that connect the old with the new. India's myths, folktales, and oral traditions are all intricately woven into the country's cultural identity. Moral, social, and spiritual frameworks have been maintained for centuries through the



transmission of stories through songs, performances, and communal rituals. These oral traditions were given new life on screen with the invention of cinema.

1. Objectives of the Study

The current study aims to examine the role of folklore and myth as cultural frameworks in Indian cinema. In particular, it seeks to:

- To analyse the adaptation of folklore into cinematic narratives and its reflection of cultural memory.
- To conduct a critical analysis of specific films (Nagamandala, Paheli, Bulbbul, Kumari, and Bhramayugam) concerning their narrative frameworks, mythological influences, and cultural depictions.
- To evaluate the psychological impact of folklore narratives on Indian audiences and their role in shaping collective memory and personal identity.
- To comprehend folklore as a cinematic instrument that connects oral traditions with contemporary film aesthetics.

2. Assumptions of the Study

This study is predicated on multiple working assumptions. First, Indian cinema uses folklore as a main story-telling tool that keeps cultural traditions alive (Dorson, 1972). Second, the way people react to folklore films depends on their social and cultural background. For example, city and country people react differently. Third, cinema serves as an intermediary between tradition and modernity, providing visual permanence to oral traditions (Dundes, 1980). Lastly, films based on folklore change how people think about morality, spirituality, and their own cultural identity.

3. Literature Review

Folklore has consistently been seen by scholars as an important part of how cultures pass on their stories. Dorson (1972) presents folklore as a field of cultural memory, whereas Dundes (1980) underscores its symbolic and interpretive aspects. Blackburn (2006) examines Indian myths and folk tales as pivotal manifestations of cultural imagination, illustrating their enduring influence on identity formation.

In the realm of cinema studies, Dwyer (2006) posits that myth and religion are integral to Indian cinematic traditions, with films serving as a visual extension of ritualistic practices. Nandy (1995) contends that cinema reflects societal desires and anxieties, serving as a cultural text that reconfigures



myths for political and psychological purposes. Recent academic work has looked closely at folklore in films. In particular, folklore in film has been the subject of more recent research. Chakraborty (2015) investigates how Indian films balance traditional and contemporary issues by adapting folklore. According to Mishra (2020), *Bulbbul* is a feminist reworking of folklore that challenges patriarchy through gothic storytelling.

Films are primary sources that function as critical texts in addition to secondary scholarship. In Nagamandala (1997), Girish Karnad transforms Kannada folk mythology into a metaphor for female desire. Rajasthani folklore is transformed into a contemporary romantic fantasy in Amol Palekar's 2005 film *Paheli*. Rahi Anil Barve's (2018) *Tumbbad*, which represents unquenchable greed, is a visual representation of the Maharashtrian myth of *Hastar*. Anvita Dutt uses Bengali folklore in *Bulbbul* (2020) to challenge patriarchal authority. The mythic imagination of Kerala is explored in Sreejith Nair's *Kumari* (2022) and Rahul Sadasivan's *Bhramayugam* (2024), which use goddesses, curses, and darkness as symbols of cultural anxiety. When taken as a whole, these pieces show the artistic and academic agreement that folklore functions as a living archive in Indian cinema, continually being reinterpreted throughout space and time.

4. Tools used for Study

Qualitative content analysis is the methodology used here. Every movie was seen several times, and the cultural settings, mythological frameworks, and folklore motifs were carefully examined. Through coding, themes were found, with an emphasis on cultural rituals, mythic archetypes, narrative structures, and symbolic imagery. Furthermore, the psychological aspect of the analysis was informed by insights from previous audience reception studies (Mishra, 2020; Nair, 2023). The study is based on critical essays, movie reviews, and secondary scholarship rather than a primary survey.

5. Selection of the films for the study

The six films chosen demonstrate the depth and diversity of Indian folklore cinema. Based on oral myths and Kannada folk theatre, Nagamandala (1997) examines fidelity, gender, and desire. In its 2005 adaptation of a Rajasthani folktale, *Paheli* emphasises love and the paranormal. Maharashtrian myth is incorporated into the horror genre in *Tumbbad* (2018), signifying colonial exploitation and greed. Bengali folk myths are transformed into gothic feminist narratives in *Bulbbul* (2020). While *Bhramayugam* (2024) explores dark myths and psychological horror, *Kumari* (2022) reimagines Kerala's



traditions of goddesses and ancestral curses. Their pan-Indian reach serves as the rationale for this choice. In addition to representing a variety of genres, including fantasy, horror, gothic, and allegory, these films collectively span several linguistic traditions, including Kannada, Rajasthani, Marathi, Bengali, and Malayalam. They also present how folklore adapts to different cinematic forms, making them perfect for comparative study.

6. Folklore as Cultural Memory

By linking current generations to ancestors' customs, folklore acts as a storehouse of collective memory. According to Blackburn (2006), myths serve as "cultural maps" that help societies define their values in addition to being stories. These oral traditions are preserved in the present day thanks to Indian cinema, which transforms them into visual form. Films like *Nagamandala* and *Kumari* show how cinema preserves cultural memory while making it accessible to modern audiences through the use of rituals, symbols, and metaphors.

7. Myth and Cinema: The Indian Context (Tamil or Kerala)

Mythological reimaginings are especially prevalent in Tamil and Malayalam films. Kerala myths of goddesses, curses, and demonic forces are incorporated into contemporary horror-fantasy frameworks in films like *Kumari* and *Bhramayugam*. These myths speak to the collective psyche, especially in cultures that still practise oral traditions and rituals.

Similarly, the mythological concepts of dharma, karma, and divine justice are frequently used in Tamil film. Allegories from epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are used in films to encourage viewers to think morally (Dwyer, 2006). Both sectors serve as examples of how folklore can be used as a narrative tool to support cultural identity while permitting reinterpretation in the context of contemporary concerns.

8. Psychological Analysis of Indian Audiences

Folklore-based cinema resonates with Indian audiences because it engages the **collective unconscious**. Archetypes like the serpent (*Nagamandala*), the ghost (*Paheli*), the demon (*Tumbbad*), or the goddess (*Kumari*) evoke primal emotions—desire, fear, greed, and justice—allowing viewers to project and process inner conflicts.

- **Gendered Psychology:** *Bulbbul* reframes women's suppressed voices as supernatural power, psychologically liberating audiences from patriarchal archetypes.



- **Fear and Morality:** *Tumbbad* externalizes greed through a monstrous deity, cautioning viewers about the destructive potential of desire.
- **Cultural Identity:** Folklore reinforces belonging and cultural pride, helping audiences connect with traditions despite modern anxieties.

Folklore films are not passively consumed by audiences; rather, they are identified with their moral dilemmas, archetypes, and symbols. Therefore, folklore films serve as mirrors of mental states, providing moral guidance, validation, or catharsis

9. Impact of Folklore Movies on Human Behaviour

Human behaviour is influenced by folklore-based films in both covert and obvious ways. On the one hand, it upholds cultural ideals like moral responsibility, faith in divine justice, and reverence for tradition. Conversely, it opposes oppressive systems, as demonstrated in *Bulbbul*, where feminist resistance is mediated through folklore.

Movies like *Tumbbad* change people's behaviour by igniting ethical discussions about exploitation and greed. *Paheli* and *Nagamandala* gently influence gender attitudes by promoting empathy for women's inner struggles and desires. Thus, cinema catalyzes social change as well as preserves cultural norms.

Folklore in cinema has tangible effects:

1. **Cultural Preservation** – Audiences reconnect with oral traditions and regional myths.
2. **Moral Lessons** – Stories such as *Tumbbad* and *Paheli* offer ethical reflection.
3. **Social Reflection** – *Bulbbul* and *Nagamandala* challenge gender roles.
4. **Emotional Catharsis** – Supernatural and mythic elements allow release of repressed fears and desires.
5. **Behavioural Influence** – Cinema becomes a **modern myth-making apparatus**, shaping perceptions of rituals, ethics, and identity.

10. Folklore as a Cinematic Tool

Folklore serves as a potent expressive medium in cinematic narrative. It offers prefabricated archetypes, ethereal themes, and story structures that hold true over time. Folklore captures universal human concerns, as Dundes (1980) points out. Folklore creates tension and terror in *Kumari* and *Bhramayugam*, permits romantic fantasy in *Paheli*, and dramatises gender struggles in *Bulbbul*.



Filmmakers employ folklore as a narrative technique, not just for authenticity, to link contemporary viewers to their ancestors' traditions and to lend symbolic significance to social criticism. Filmmakers have frequently used folklore to construct stories and depict culture. With its archetypal framework of heroes, villains, gods, spirits, and supernatural beings, folklore enables filmmakers to tackle both current issues and timeless human dilemmas. This paper argues that folklore in films serves as a cultural and psychological tool that unites myth and modernity, memory and imagination, tradition and critique, and is more than just ornamental.

11. Narrative Structure of Folklore Narratives

Films based on folklore frequently use recurrent narrative structures that are inspired by myth. The idea that love transcends reality is a motif used by *Paheli* and *Nagamandala*. Cycles of curse and redemption are used in *Kumari* and *Bhramayugam*. The theme of unquenchable greed leading to self-destruction is best illustrated by *Tumbbad*. *Bulbbul* uses supernatural empowerment to dramatise transformation. Although they are indigenous to Indian oral traditions, these narrative forms recite Joseph Campbell's "mythic cycle." They support the idea put forth by Dundes (1980) that folklore stories are both culturally specific and universal.

12. Cultural Representation of Folklore in Cinema

Indian culture is portrayed in folklore cinema in a variety of ways. It maintains **spiritual traditions** like serpent myths (*Nagamandala*) and goddess worship (*Kumari*). It contains **moral allegories**, such as *Paheli*'s examination of duty and love or *Tumbbad*'s critique of greed. As demonstrated by *Bulbbul*'s feminist reworking of folklore, it also functions as a **site of social critique**.

1 *Nagamandala* (1997)

Nagamandala, which was directed by Girish Karnad, explores justice, morality, and desire through the symbolism of serpents while fusing Indian mythology with folktales (Karnad, 1997). Reflecting the episodic and moralistic structure typical of Indian folklore, the film celebrates folk storytelling traditions while criticising patriarchal norms.

2. *Paheli*, 2005

Paheli tells the tale of a ghost tending to a neglected wife by fusing folktales and fantasy. The story is rooted in culture through folk songs, costumes, and rural settings that highlight devotion, love, and divine intervention (Sen, 2005).



3 Thumbad (2018)

Thumbad creates a mythic world where greed and divine justice coexist in this dark fantasy that draws inspiration from Maharashtra folklore. The story is shaped by folk morality, while the lighting, music, and visual effects create a mythic atmosphere. Varma (2018).

4 Bulbul (2020)

Bulbul, which is set in Bengal, challenges gender oppression and social hierarchies through folklore. Bulbul's journey of empowerment is framed by supernatural elements drawn from folk tales, illustrating how folklore can challenge tradition (Basu, 2020).

5 Kumari (2022)

Kumari incorporates legends, rituals, and tribal folk culture into its narratives. Cinema's role in conserving indigenous heritage is highlighted by the way songs, dances, and mythic elements communicate tribal identity and cultural knowledge (Rao, 2022).

6 Bhramayugam (2024)

Bhramayugam uses local folklore to examine morality, fear, and cosmic justice. Character arcs, music, and visual style are all influenced by supernatural and mythic themes, which uphold mythic consciousness in modern culture (Menon, 2024).

As a result, folklore film serves as both a cultural transformation and preservation tool. It both questions and reaffirms values, demonstrating the dual function of film as a reformist text and a defender of tradition.

13. Results/Findings

According to the study,

- In film, folklore plays a crucial role in cultural storytelling by serving as both an ideological and narrative tool.
- Indian films adapt the form of myths while maintaining their essence, reinterpreting them for contemporary audiences.
- Folklore films affect viewers' psychology, influencing their views on gender, spirituality, and morality.



- Cinema serves as a cultural archive by bridging visual modernity and oral traditions.

14. Limitations of the Study

This research revealed a number of limitations. The scope of India's varied folk traditions cannot be adequately represented by the analysis, which is restricted to six films. Tribal communities and the Northeast are two areas that continue to be underrepresented. Scholarly literature was also inconsistently available; while films like Nagamandala and Paheli lack in-depth analysis, others like Tumbbad and Bulbbul are thoroughly examined. Lastly, secondary research rather than primary audience surveys is used to determine the psychological and behavioural effects of folklore films, which limits the range of empirical findings.

The major limitations I faced while selecting these movies were

- **Bias by Region**

The majority of the examined films come from popular or well-known national studios. There are still a lot of unexplored folk-based films from independent and rural cinema. This produces a partial representation of folklore.

- **Accessibility and Language**

The selection is restricted to films that are more widely accessible (nationally distributed or with subtitles). Due to distribution or translation issues, some folk films in regional languages might not have been available.

- **Limitations of Genre**

A great deal of the films are in the mythic, fantasy, or horror genres, which are ripe for folklore. The scope is limited because other genres (drama, comedy, romance) may also use folklore, but they are not included here.

- **Reception of the Audience**

The study does not include empirical audience research (such as surveys or interviews) to gauge how viewers truly react to folklore in films; instead, it concentrates on content analysis and psychological interpretation.

- **Interpretation Subjectivity**

The analysis is interpretative because folklore is multi-layered and symbolic. The findings may not be as universal as they could be if different researchers interpret the same symbols in different ways.



15. Conclusion

Indian film shows that folklore is a dynamic cultural force rather than a thing of the past. Films reinterpret traditions, preserve cultural memory, and encourage viewers to reflect on their morals and psychological states through myth and folk tales. The chosen films show how Indian cultural consciousness is shaped by folklore, which functions as both an **artistic medium** and a **social critique**.

Folklore films ensure that myths are still relevant in today's world by bridging the gap between **memory and modernity** through the translation of oral traditions into cinematic narratives. In the end, folklore film shows how tradition can change, be criticised, and inspire, in addition to demonstrating its enduring power. Furthermore, films that are based on folklore demonstrate how deeply historical narratives influence contemporary cultural anxieties, making them an effective medium for cultural transformation and continuity

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