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Dadasaheb Phalke and the Cinematic Construction of Hindu Identity

^{*1} Tanim Kumari

^{*1} Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar, India.

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Abstract

Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (1870–1944), known as Dadasaheb Phalke, is called the ‘Father of Indian Cinema’ whose pioneering works established the foundations of Indian filmmaking. His films draw upon and engage with Hindu myths defining and shaping the early trajectory of Indian cinema. The paper seeks to read the choices of Phalke and his films i.e., based on Hinduism and how his films brought the nationalist fervour with the reframing of the devotion and worship of God. The article argues that Phalke became the symbol of changing cinema; he made cinema as a tool of worship that preserved the culture and became a mode of *darśan*.

*Corresponding Author

Tanim Kumari

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar, India.

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Introduction

Today, Indian cinema is the largest film industry, however, it goes back to 1913 when it began with Dadasaheb Phalke’s seminal film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913). The career of Phalke needs to be understood within the socio-political scenario of colonial India. The Orientalist narratives infused with cultural dominance of British redefined Indian civilization as conservative and superstitious. In such period, the resurgence of indigenous traditions became a major aid to nationalist movements. Social reformers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Vivekananda, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Dayananda Saraswati, Aurobindo Ghose, and others emphasized Hindu symbols and manuscripts as emblems of cultural pride. Experimenting and working with a new medium, Phalke entered this discursive space by utilizing film to perform and portray on screen Hindu stories, thus regaining narrative space from colonial influence.

The British used photography and ethnographic cinema to represent India as something exotic or primitive, however, Phalke sought to represent the culture and roots of India as moral, sophisticated, and spiritual significant. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) states that the colonial power alienated indigenous traditions while forming a new discourse of nationalism through cultural revival. Against this backdrop, the films of Phalke can be understood as interventions in

reclaiming narrative sovereignty. Ganti (2004) similarly opines that “Phalke’s socio-political context was significantly shaped by anticolonial struggles against the British. Phalke himself had very nationalist intentions as evident in his concerns for an indigenous film industry” (2004). Phalke used cinema not just for entertainment but an educational and devotional forum helping to instill pride for India’s rich cultural heritage. In this sense, Phalke’s approach realigns with the Platonic ideas of art i.e., a powerful form of *mimesis*—a medium that can corrupt or elevate society. While Plato was highly suspicious of art’s ability to distort truth, he also accepts its power to influence and guide citizens toward virtue if it’s a right sort of poetry. Phalke’s films, rooted in dharmic ideals, illustrate this constructive model, providing not deceptive illusions, but visual narratives of truth (*satya*), devotion (*bhakti*), and duty (*dharma*), therefore, functioning as moral pedagogy for a colonized people in search of cultural self-definition.

Hindu Mythology as Narrative Foundation

Phalke’s first feature, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), narrated the telling of the righteous king Harishchandra who sacrifices his wealth, kingdom to uphold truth and endures suffering. This tale, taken from the *Markandeya Purana* is popular in folk performance traditions too, echoed with the religious

sentiments of audiences as an allegory of moral strength and *dharma*. The symbolic choice mediated and expressed a critique of colonial injustice while enforcing the moral superiority of Indian tradition. According to Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel (2002), the mythological elements in early cinema were not merely a recreation but a visual tool for preserving religious traditions. This is illustrated through Phalke's works that blended devotional narrative with cinematic innovation. Similarly, Virdi (2003) emphasises the early Indian cinema as a mirror of social history through myth, constructing shared moral and cultural structures under colonial rule. Following *Raja Harishchandra*, Phalke maintained and persisted with the mythological themes:

- *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1913), based on the story of the demon Bhasmasura and Mohini avatar of Vishnu, bringing in the themes of illusion (*maya*) and divine intervention on screen.
- *Satyavan Savitri* (1914) delineated the ideal of devotion of wife, as Savitri contradicted Yama, the god of death, to revive her husband's life.
- *Lanka Dahan* (1917), one of his most successful films, presented Hanuman's burning of Lanka on celluloid.

These films were not just the mythological adaptations, but they were the icons of religious and cultural traditions. By bringing divine figures to life and epic heroes visible on screen, Phalke modernized traditional narratives while restoring their religious sanctity.

Cinema as Modern Darśan

The concept of *darśan*-the act of viewing and being seen by the divine-was reconstructed through Phalke's films. The divine figures on screen when encountered by audiences brought a different experience of cinema for the continuation of temple-based devotion. The film *Lanka Dahan* (1917) showcases how the sight of Hanuman ablazed Lanka evoking profound religious sentiments. Film historians state how during the screenings of *Lanka Dahan*, audiences removed their footwear before entering cinema halls, replicating the etiquette of temple (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004).

Therefore, there is a blurring of boundary between ritual and recreation as cinema became a fresh site of religious experience. In this sense, Phalke shifted cinema into an ongoing medium of visual devotional traditions of India, from temple iconography to folk theatre. Phalke exercised different innovative cinematic methods and techniques while providing his work in Hindu aesthetics. He derived inspiration from Raja Ravi Varma's mythological art, which had famous visual portrayal of Gods during late 19th century India. Phalke elaborated and used Varma's legacy into moving pictures by animating these paintings and images on the celluloid (Pinney 2004). Phalke using of special effects such as superimpositions and frame-by-frame animation gave way to projecting the miracles and divine powers plausibly. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999) underscore such innovations as important and foundational techniques for shaping an Indian cinematic idiom, while Rajadhyaksha (2009) positions these within broader negotiations of contemporary culture. As in *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1913), the transformation sequences generated a sense of awe akin to witnessing divine play (*lila*). These kinds of techniques not only amazed the audience but intensified and amplified the belief in the supernatural, divine powers associating cinematic spectacle with spiritual imagination.

Moreover, Phalke's religious narratives possessed a strong sense of nationalist undertones. By adapting stories from the

epics-*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Phalke fostered a sense of pride in indigenous traditions making his films a source of reminder for India's civilizational heritage and moral values, refuting colonial narratives of cultural inferiority. In his 1917 pamphlet *The Birth of the Indian Cinema*, Phalke focused on cinema's prospect to boost and encourage the national pride by delineating Indian traditions. Also, by contrasting the Hindu epics to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Phalke argued how the cultural treasures of India must get equal recognition. Therefore, Phalke's works can be viewed within the larger part of cultural revivalism along with political nationalism.

The viewing experience thus, erased the difference between spectatorship and worship. Contemporary accounts suggest that audiences responded to Phalke's films with religious reverence. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy have stated how during the screening of Phalke's films "the figures of long-told stories took flesh and blood. The impact was overwhelming. When Rama appeared on the screen in *Lanka Dahan*, and when in *Shri Krishna Janma*, Lord Krishna himself at last appeared, men and women in the audience prostrated themselves before the screen" (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy qtd. in Lutgendorf 1995, 219). This devotional reception suggests the permeable boundaries between cinema and devotional practices in early Indian society. Cinema was not just the imported Western tool but a novel form of experiencing Hindu narratives. The spiritual and devotional interplay validated Phalke's films by merging religion with technology, building a uniquely Indian cinematic language.

Beyond Mythology: Morality and Social Values

Phalke was aligned with Hindu consciousness and his cinema was largely based on morality and the social values. The spiritual narratives: the narratives of virtue, sacrifice, justice with the lens of dharmic ideals, which was presented with the characters like Harishchandra or Savitri, intensified and uttered the new fervour of honesty, loyalty, and altruism amongst people. The films subtly addressed to the social issues by glorifying the devotion of Savitri and impacting the mindset of people with the discourses on how the role of a woman should be conducted in Indian society. On the other hand, the tale of Harishchandra reflected the symbol of intricacy and sacrifice, and through the engagement of all these themes, Phalke's films brought the spirituality of Hindus as a lived experience and also as a form of didactic pamphlet with moral and social pedagogy.

Challenges and Boundaries in the Films of Dadasaheb Phalke

The huge popularity that Phalke gained, along with the kind of his reliance on Hindu myths exclusively, however, it raised questions about the diversity and inclusivity. The films of Phalke encouraged Hindu cultural narratives, which somehow pushed aside other religious traditions within India's pluralistic society. The beginning of Indian cinema was intensely tied with the Hindu consciousness, and it establishes a precedent for debates about the inclusion of other religions as well Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999). Further, the fusion of the nationalism of culture and the Hindu consciousness made the ground for the debates that still is raised in the Indian cinema today. Moreover, he encountered challenges in advancing his career because during the 1920s and 30s, economic and commercial pressures, along with the choices that were changed, neglected the mythological cinema. However, even with all the social and domestic issues that were dealt and gained prominence, the mythological genre lived on with Phalke's pioneering efforts.

Impact of Phalke's Films

Phalke's influence is not only limited to Indian cinema, but also the methods he brought forth in filmmaking, along with the redefining of the thematic base or ground of Indian cinema. The genre of devotional films flourished in several decades that also influenced the other directors from the contemporary times of silent era. And the Hindu scriptures, Ramayana and Mahabharata, also were the inspiration for the filmmaking that moved the Indian audiences and gained massive popularity even in the daily soaps like Ramanand Sagar Ramayana or B.R. Chopra's Mahabharata. In 1969, the Government of India began the prestigious recognition of Dada Faltyk Saheb or the award of four films in the name of Dada Saheb Faltyk as the highest honour of Indian cinema that presents his indelible mark in the Indian cinema. The vision of cinema he had revived and increased the India's cinematic imagination.

Conclusion

Dadasaheb Phalke's inclination with Hinduism was the major pointer for his filmmaking as it were related to religion, art, and nationalism, and it was so much intertwined in the beginning years of Indian cinema that it had an indelible impact on audiences that it persists till today. The double role of cinema, that is, it made aware the audiences with the cultural and the spiritual identity of India that carved his contribution and legacy influencing the aesthetic and the thematic development of Indian film for future generations to come (Rajadhyaksha 2009; Pinney 2004). It's due to the Faltyk's role in cinema that this viewing of cinema became more of than entertainment, it became darshan, an epitome of nationalism that was projected on screen.

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