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## A ‘Made to Satisfaction Goddess’ Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited

Part Two

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### 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,<sup>7</sup> is based on a story drawn from a popular pamphlet belonging to the genre known as *vrata katha*. A *vrata* 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.” *Vrata* stories generally fall into two categories: one explains the origin of the *vrata* or of the deity in whose honor it is observed, and the other describes the paradigmatic observance of the *vrata* by a human devotee; something usually goes awry in this observance, with disastrous consequences that are overcome by performing the *vrata* correctly a second time. Some *vrata* 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 *vrats*, women are far more inclined to this type of ritual and many *vrats* are passed down within families through women’s oral tradition (Pearson 1996:3-11).

The ideology and practice of *vrats* 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 *vrats* 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 standardise 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 *pandits* and the language Sanskritised Hindi. Nevertheless, the easy accessibility of such pamphlets, coupled with the gradual increase in women’s literacy, has facilitated the independent performance of *vrats* by many women.

Long neglected by scholars of Hinduism, *vrata* 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 *vrats* as “rituals contributing to the subordination and disempowerment of women”—and indeed, *vrata* 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 *vrata* 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 *vrata* 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 *vrata* 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.

### **Santoshi Ma is Distinctive**

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."<sup>8</sup> Her distinctive features figure 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 everyday 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 favourable beginnings, who is worshiped to "remove obstacles" and insure success. His auspicious elephant head, generous paunch, and hand-held bowl of rounded *laddus* (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 endeavours," rather than the attainment of spiritual liberation, salvation, or a more favourable 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 *vrats* 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.

### **Simple Vrat and Rituals**

The simplicity of the *vrat* is striking: it is 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 popularised 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*).<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> That Santoshi Ma is satisfied with such offerings again underscores her benevolent character as well as her accessibility to 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 *vrats*, is known as *udyapan* or "bringing to conclusion." The *vrat* story to be recited or heard as part of the ritual may be summarised as follows.

### **The Vrat Katha**

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 recognised 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 humanised 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 honour them. The divine sage Narada appears, immediately recognisable 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!"

### Human Divinities

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 characterise 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" (*charitra*) 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 recognise 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 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,



Narada extols the greatness of newborn Santoshi Ma.



The *darshan*ic dialogue during Satyavati's ecstatic worship of Santoshi Ma.

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 motorised 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.

### 'In Mother's Eyes'

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 *bhajans* 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 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 *darshan*ic 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 dialogue that is further emphasised by the lyrics of the hymn.

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

**Chorus:** ...In Mother's eyes!  
**Satyavati:** 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 Krishna," 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 *darshan*ic 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* dialogue 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 *Ramcharitmanas* verse in which the goddess Parvati assures Sita that she will obtain her heart's wish (*Ramcharitmanas* 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.

### Family Conflicts & Intrigues

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 after 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-washed 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 honour, and this is provided by introducing another character unknown to the *katha*: a villain (signaled by his moustache 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



Birju (r) with his mother and Daya Ram.



The jealous sisters-in-law, Durga and Maya.

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 Hapless *Bahu*

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, neighbours—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:** (coily 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. The refrain of Birju's song, heard while the couple walk along the riverbank in a pilgrimage city.

### Romance and Pilgrimage

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



Birju and Satyavati enjoy a devotional "honeymoon"

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 jealousy 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 dialogue is deliciously witty.

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

**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 abode) after a long time.

**Parvati:** What can I do, Lakshmi? I’m kept so busy serving Bholenath [the innocent one, another name for 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.



**By praising Santoshi Ma, the mischievous Narada provokes the jealous wrath of three senior goddesses.**

**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 worshipping 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.

The camera cuts to the door of Birju’s house, where three *sadhus* are calling for alms. They are angrily sent away by Durga and Maya, but Satyavati calls them back and humbly offers them the prasada of Santoshi Ma. Though initially surprised by the poor offering, they note Satyavati’s devotion and accept it, loudly acclaiming her patron goddess. Back in heaven, the same mendicants appear before the goddesses, who are still

fuming at Narada’s tidings. When the *sadhus* too acclaim Santoshi Ma, the goddesses’ rage erupts afresh and they begin to push them out the door. The three then transform into Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, much to the embarrassment of their wives. But they continue to praise Santoshi Ma, and offer the goddesses the prasada they have received. “Gur-chana—you call that prasada?” asks Parvati disdainfully, and Lakshmi adds, “We don’t eat that!” After the men have left, their wives continue to fume: “Who is goddess Santoshi compared to us?” Soon they hatch a plot: by ruining Satyavati’s happiness, they will reveal to mortals the futility of worshipping Santoshi Ma.

### **Domestication of Deities**

These scenes evoke complex associations. Satyavati’s recall of the *sadhus* underscores the folk belief that, although many in mendicant garb are merely lazy drifters, *sadhus* should never be turned away empty handed, for they may be enlightened souls or (as here) gods in disguise. Class distinctions are also suggested in the goddesses’s disdainful refusal of the humble *prasada* brought from earth by



their husbands. Their initial response to the three *sadhus*—calling them “beggars” and pushing them away—mirrors that of Satyavati’s sisters-in-law and underscores the goddesses’ affinity with them as “established” figures in their respective families, human and divine. Similarly, Satyavati’s own affinity with Santoshi Ma—both are young newcomers in their respective realms—is likewise affirmed. The stage is now set for the goddesses’ subsequent persecution of Satyavati/Santoshi Ma, which will unfold through the young bride’s female in-laws.

This scene and ensuing ones in which the goddesses gleefully watch the havoc they wreak are discussed by Kurtz, who notes the apparent discrepancy between theater audiences’ enthusiastic reception of such scenes—which were “particularly relished” during screenings—and the disapproval expressed by some of his interviewees for what they claimed were innovations inspired by the “commercial motives” of the filmmaker (Kurtz 1992:14). Kurtz accounts for this paradoxical reaction through his reworked psychoanalytic theory: the goddesses’ anger represents the child’s subconscious memory of the unequal relationship between his natural mother and her female in-laws, which is enacted in a “more explicit and more exciting” manner in the film than in the written story (ibid. 116). Kurtz further argues that “the commercial nature of the mythological film,” of which the audience is aware, permits it to take “unorthodox” liberties with the story (ibid. 269 n.2). Although I agree with Kurtz that the dynamics of joint family households are being invoked here, I am unconvinced by his reorientation of the plot around suppressed memories of (male) childhood. Its central

character is patently Satyavati and its conflict centers on *her* mistreatment by her in-laws, reflecting domestic tension that is hardly an unconscious memory, but rather a daily experience for many women. Further, as I have already noted, the supposed problem of cinematic “unorthodoxy” ignores the ubiquity of this kind of “domestication” of deities and its ready acceptance by most Hindus in a narrative context. However, it is understandable that in a more analytical context—as under a foreign researcher’s “close questioning” about the religious meaning of a film scene (ibid. 14)—some interviewees might indeed feel compelled to object to it.

In a dream, Satyavati is visited by the three goddesses, who order her to stop worshipping Santoshi Ma and to venerate them alone. She politely refuses, and they warn of dire consequences: “Your life will be hell.” The story now unfolds as a series of worsening tribulations, beginning with Birju’s abandoning the household after learning that he has been served the leavings of his brothers’ meals. Although this incident parallels the printed *vrata katha*, it introduces psychological and emotional complexity. The happy-go-lucky Birju, who has till now been oblivious of his family’s disapproval of his ways and hostility toward his wife, becomes incensed when he learns of the tainted food he has been eating. But whereas he can think only of the insult to his honor, we see, in Satyavati’s terrified pleading to be taken with him, her awareness of the fate she will suffer in his absence. Birju, of course, ignores her pleas and makes a dramatic exit, leaving her at the mercy of his family. The goddesses, watching on high, are delighted, and promise Narada still worse to come.

## Goddesses & Sisters-in-Law

As Birju takes a ferry across a lake, they generate a tempest and attempt to drown him, but Satyavati’s prayers to Santoshi Ma are answered: the goddess (now in a youthful, adult form, portrayed by Anita Guha) appears on earth and rescues him, showing herself to Birju as a young ascetic woman in a saffron sari. Apparently unaware of this, the jealous goddesses also visit earth, appearing as village women who inform Birju’s family of his death. Though Satyavati refuses to believe this (since the Mother cannot have ignored her prayers) and the compassionate Daya Ram rushes out to search for his brother, the sisters-in-law now treat Satyavati as an inauspicious widow and domestic menial. They forcibly rub the vermilion powder (connoting a woman’s *suhag* or married state) from the part of her hair and tirelessly persecute her—“Her man kicked the bucket, and now she’s eating us out of house and home!”—as they starve her on *rotis* made from chaff and water served in a coconut shell. Further trials ensue: finding Satyavati alone cutting wood in the forest, the rogue Banke attempts revenge for his earlier humiliation. Before fainting, Satyavati calls on Santoshi Ma, who again manifests, transforming her trident into a cobra that chases Banke to the edge of a cliff from which he falls to his death. As in the earlier scene with Birju, the goddess (glancing at her divine trappings as if musing that she is overdressed for earth) transforms herself into a young ascetic before tenderly awaking Satyavati, who thus fails to recognize her.

Birju, meanwhile, enjoys excellent fortune. Hired by a gem merchant, he learns to assay precious stones and receives the attentions of the old man’s voluptuous only daughter, Geeta. Unlike the hero of the printed

story, who simply forgets his wife when abroad, Birju suffers amnesia induced by the three jealous goddesses, allowing viewers to voyeuristically savour his budding love affair. This too offers education in Hindi Film 101, since the hero with two loves—one domestic and virtuous, the other exotic and risqué—is one of Bombay cinema’s enduring tropes. Geeta wears skimpy, glittering saris and beehive hairdos, and Birju sports a rakish moustache and plays his flute during their frolics in her mansion and nearby flower garden. This is intercut with pathetic scenes of Satyavati’s worsening condition, and a sung commentary on this by a male singer, “*Mat ro*” (“Don’t cry”) that introduces nationalist discourse about the moral fortitude of “the Indian woman.” But the horrible taunts of her sisters-in-law, who eventually confine her to a small corner of the courtyard and beat and starve her, even as they force her to scour pots and chop firewood, drives Birju’s wife to attempt suicide. She is stopped by Narada himself, in his sole appearance in the film’s world of mortals, who comforts her and tells her to perform the sixteen-Fridays fast for Santoshi Ma. Narada’s intervention here is notable, replacing the anonymous group of women in the written *katha*. The whimsical sage served as agent provocateur in Santoshi Ma’s birth and again intervened to stir up the senior goddesses’ jealousy against her. Now he further incites Satyavati to defeat them. His presence in fact accentuates the linked parallelism of the two narratives—for just as Satyavati is being tested by her in-laws, so Santoshi Ma, through Narada’s

machinations, is being tested by the (diffused, collective) will of the gods.

Satyavati’s devotion is now given a ritual framework and a specific goal. The enactment of the rite is dramatised by another *bhajan*, “*Karti hum tumhara vrat*” (“I perform your *vrat*”), which shows the passage of time through the increasing number of clay lamps on Satyavati’s tray and the darkening circles under her eyes, dramatically intercut with scenes of Birju and Geeta in love. Unlike the earlier hymns with their celebratory tone, this one is a plaintive cry of distress, with the refrain:

You are my only mooring in midstream, O Mother, carry me safely across!

As the climax of the fast approaches, the tricky Narada again warns the three goddesses that their plan may go awry, and they contrive to make it impossible for Satyavati to obtain even a scant cup of *gur-chana* for her sixteenth Friday (the fat merchant who spurns her request for the loan of these humble provisions drowns beneath an inspirational verse, attributed to Tulsidas, that begins, “Compassion is the root of *dharma*”). Santoshi Ma again intervenes, this time taking the form of a gap-toothed old woman, white-haired and bent over a cane.

The goddess magically causes the needed supplies to fly out of the astonished merchant’s shop and onto Satyavati’s tray; she offers them, completes her *vrat*, and finally verbalises her request: that her husband not forget her.

Santoshi Ma immediately restores Birju’s memory and, for good measure, performs a miracle to smooth things out with his employer and Geeta, so that they send him off with good wishes and bulging coffers. She also causes Geeta to meet Daya Ram, wandering in search of his lost brother, and to direct him, too, homeward. As in the printed story, Birju is horrified to discover his wife’s plight, and though his family members (eyeing his wealth) proffer their love, he rejects them, pelting them with the coins he says are more important to them than family relationships or even God. He proceeds to build a grand mansion for himself and his wife, complete with its own ornate temple to Santoshi Ma. Satyavati, now restored to health and richly dressed, plans a lavish *udyapan* ceremony and, harbouring no grudge, begs her husband to forgive his kin, whom she invites to the festivities. These are depicted through a reprise of the film’s first *bhajan*, but with a striking visual difference. The dancing women waving *arti* trays are now no longer rustic belles in mirrorwork skirts, dancing in a village temple, but middle class matrons in fashionable silk and “georgette” saris, dancing in a “party” setting redolent of bourgeois comfort. The transformation encodes not merely Satyavati’s own odyssey, but the desired journey of many an Indian family.

Durga and Maya (inspired, of course, by the three



“*Karti hum tumhara vrat*”

goddesses who have yet to admit defeat) squeeze lime juice into one of the milk dishes for the ceremonial meal. The results are literally volcanic (Santoshi Ma's angry face is intercut with stock footage of a lava-spewing eruption), but unlike the written story, the film does *not* direct the goddess's ire at Satyavati and Birju. Instead, the two sisters-in-law are stricken, their limbs twisted and faces blackened,



**Santoshi Ma appears to Satyavati as an old woman.**

and their sons who have eaten the tainted food fall dead. Moreover, the earthquake that rocks Birju's new house also shakes the worlds of the three goddesses, causing their divine husbands to faint. Although Birju's kin accuse Satyavati of poisoning the children and threaten to kill both him and her, the seniormost brother, Daya Ram, appears and defends Satyavati, declaring, "She is not a sinner; she is a paragon of truth and virtue. She is not a woman, she is a goddess." When the angry accusations continue, Satyavati runs to the temple and offers a final, anguished plea in the form of the song "*Madad karo Santoshi Mata*" ("Help me, Mother Santoshi").

Today, don't let infamy stain, O Mother,

The fair name of our bond.

This invocation of their *nata* (intimate "bond," "connection," or "relationship") brings the goddess herself to the scene, to rectify all wrongs, reversing, at Satyavati's request, the deformity of Durga and Maya, and restoring all the children to life. As all errant parties confess the wrongs done to Satyavati, the Mother blesses the family and disappears amid loud acclamation.

A brief parallel coda ensues in heaven, where Narada leads the three

repentant goddesses to "take shelter at the feet" of Santoshi Ma. Looking embarrassed, they state that they always knew who she was (Parvati remarks, "She is my granddaughter"), but were merely testing the depth of Satyavati's devotion.<sup>13</sup> The camera then cuts to Santoshi Ma's face; she does not speak, and her impassive features might be variously interpreted. To me, she appears coolly triumphant, neither needing nor caring for the defeated goddesses' endorsement. Their spouses now materialise, along with Ganesh, to form a tableau: Santoshi Ma in the centre, elevated on her lotus throne and with rays of light emanating from her, flanked by gods and goddesses—a family photo, but also a court scene, with its most important personage centrally placed—as Narada solicits a final benediction that explicitly confirms a "new" deity's incorporation into the pantheon: "Now all of you give a blessing to Goddess Santoshi so that her name too, like yours, will live eternally."

### Quest for "Satisfaction"

Several scholars of Hindi cinema have argued that significant thematic changes occurred in commercial films during the mid-1970s. Prasad has noted the decline, after several decades of dominance, of the type of

"social" film that he calls the "feudal family romance," and its replacement by a "populist cinema of mobilization" that attempts to address (and, according to Prasad, to co-opt) the rising expectations of lower-class groups "agitating for the realisation of the new nation's professed democratic and socialist ideals...." (Prasad 1998:118, 138-159). Similarly Kajri Jain notes the shift in leading men from the "soft, romantic"

heroes of earlier decades to the unquestioned megastar of the 70s and 80s, Amitabh Bachchan, whose lithe and sinewy physique contributed to his effective portrayal, in numerous films, of an "energized subaltern," a working class "angry young man" (Jain 2001: 11-15). Significantly, the major action hits of 1975, *Deewar* and *Sholay*, figure as key texts in both scholars' analyses.

1975 was also, of course, the year when nearly three decades of Congress Party rule suffered its most significant challenge. Amid exposures of widespread bureaucratic corruption and a court decision against the Prime Minister, activist Jayaprakash Narayan called for a "total revolution," and massive strikes threatened to cripple the country's nationalised infrastructure. Indira Gandhi responded in June by declaring a state of national emergency, suspending constitutional liberties and freedom of the press, and jailing thousands of her opponents. This desperate measure would eventually further weaken the Congress mandate, leading to Gandhi's massive defeat at the polls in 1977 and, in the longer term, to the rise of powerful opposition parties that often mobilised local, caste- and class-based identities. Though the changes that ensued certainly stopped short

of “total revolution,” they nevertheless eroded the authority of the elite that had been ruling the nation since Independence, and contributed to the political awakening and rising expectations of formerly disenfranchised groups: “scheduled” and “backward castes” and lower-middle-class labourers, artisans, and merchants.

### Non-Elite Assertiveness

Rather than categorise *Jai Santoshi Maa* as an anomalously-successful mythological in a year of violent “mobilisation” films, I propose that it too represents part of a larger picture of non-elite assertiveness and agency, but with specific relevance to an audience unaddressed by films like *Deewar* and *Sholay*: an audience mainly consisting of lower-middle-class women. The adaptation of a popular *vrata-katha* to the screen—skillfully preserving key features of its written version while also invoking and in fact demonstrating the representational and narrative strategies of mainstream cinema—helped to incorporate this new audience into the “public culture” of the period. Evoking a rural and lower-class ethos through its setting and themes, and full of clever inter-textual references accessible (and hence satisfying) to its audience, this is a film that addresses viewers’ aspirations in several ways.

Above all, it concerns the life experience that is typically the most traumatic for an Indian woman: that of being wrenched from her *mayka* or maternal home and forced to adjust to a new household in which she is often treated as an outsider who must be tested and disciplined, sometimes harshly, before she can be integrated into the family. Whereas many women are sustained in this ordeal by the love of their maternal kin, to whom they regularly return for sometimes lengthy visits, this option is unavailable to Satyavati—her aging,

widower father is not in a position to offer her the full comfort of the *mayka*. Instead, its position is taken by the ultimate *mayka*: the divine Mother herself. Satyavati’s relationship with Santoshi Ma enables her to endure the sufferings inflicted on her by her sisters-in-law and to triumph over them, but it also accomplishes more.

It insures that Satyavati’s life consistently departs from the script that patriarchal society writes for a girl of her status: she marries a man of her own choosing, enjoys a companionate relationship (and independent travel) with her husband, and ultimately acquires a prosperous home of her own, out of reach of her in-laws. Moreover, viewers can enjoy her achievement of all this because it is presented as the “Mother’s grace,” bestowed on a humble, submissive woman who overtly asks little for herself. While appearing to adhere to the code of a conservative extended family (the systemic abuses of which are dramatically highlighted), Satyavati nevertheless quietly achieves goals, shared by many women, that subvert this code.

This oblique assertiveness has a class dimension as well. The three goddesses are seen to be “established” both religiously and materially: they preside over plush celestial homes and expect expensive offerings. Santoshi Ma, who is happy with *gur-chana* and is in fact associated with “little,” less-educated, and less-advantaged people, is in their view a poor newcomer threatening to usurp their status. They intend to nip this attempted “upward mobility” in the bud, yet in the end must concede defeat and bestow their (reluctant?) blessing on the *nouvelle arrivée*. The socio-domestic aspect of the film (goddesses as senior in-laws, oppressing a young *bahu*) thus parallels its socio-economic aspect

(goddesses as established bourgeois matrons, looking scornfully at the aspirations of poorer women).

### Happy Reconciliation among Goddesses

Satyavati’s relationship to Santoshi Ma, established through the parallel story of the goddesses, suggests that there is more agency involved here than at first appears to be the case—though it is the diffused, depersonalised agency favoured in Hindu narrative (as in Santoshi Ma’s own birth story). Satyavati’s successful integration into Birju’s family, indeed her emergence as its most prosperous female member, parallels Santoshi Ma’s acceptance in her divine clan and revelation as its most potent *shakti*. In both cases this happens without the intervention, so standard in Hindi cinema, of a male hero, for there are no exemplary male figures in the film. Birju is a pleasant but fairly clueless chap who escapes disaster only through the timely intervention of his wife. In heaven, the *tridev* (*Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*) are likewise amiable gentlemen, yet evidently in control neither of their wives nor of the cosmos. If there is a presiding divine figure (apart from the quixotic prankster, Narada, who pushes the plot along through a series of seemingly whimsical and even malicious interventions) it is the serene and self-possessed “mother of satisfaction,” Santoshi Ma.

Yet through its visual treatment of the reciprocal gaze of *darshan* and its use of parallel narratives, the film also suggests that Santoshi Ma and Satyavati—deity and devotee—are, in fact, one, a truth finally declared, at film’s end, by the wise and compassionate Daya Ram. As in the ideology of *tantric* ritual (or the conventions of “superhero” narrative in the West), the “mild-mannered” and submissive Satyavati merges, through devotion

and sheer endurance, with her ideal and alter-ego, the cosmic superpower Santoshi Ma. Similarly (and only apparently paradoxically), the latter's ultimate incorporation into the "established" pantheon comes about precisely *through the persistent agency* of her long-suffering earthly counterpart. This is in fact consistent with the relationship between divine and human realms found in much Hindu lore, which reverses the standard Christian formula to present an ultimately human-centered theology that unfolds, so to speak, "in heaven as it is on earth."

In a further theo-visual argument, the film proposes that not only is Santoshi Ma available to all women through her *vrat* ritual, she *is*, in fact, all women. Appearing as a little girl at the film's beginning, as a self-confident young woman in her manifestations throughout most of the story, and as a grandmotherly crone on the final Friday of Satyavati's fast, Santoshi Ma makes herself available to viewers as an embodiment of the female life cycle, and conveys the quietly mobilising message that it is reasonable for very woman to expect, within that cycle, her own measure of "satisfaction" in the form of love, comfort, and respect. □

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> I use the Romanised spelling of the title given in the film credits. Elsewhere I spell the goddess' name as Santoshi Ma.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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)

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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, 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.

<sup>9</sup> My description of the ritual and story is based on Simha and Agnihotri 2000:338-339. This massive compendium of hundreds of *vrats* 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).

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> 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 *puranas*). 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).

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> This kind of "excuse-ex-machina" is also found in brahmanical narrative, where it is inserted to preclude the (impossible) admission of injustice committed by male exemplars. Two famous examples are Rama's bland assertion, following Sita's successful completion of a fire ordeal, that he never actually doubted her virtue (*Ramayana* 6:121), and King Dushyanta's similar disclaimer to Shakuntala (in the *Mahabharata* version of the Shakuntala story, in which the king never loses his memory but lies about his liaison with the girl; *Mahabharata* 1.7.69). In both cases, the preceding powerful speeches by the women, and the awareness of the injustice they have suffered, has tended to make a stronger impression on audiences than the face-saving coda.

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