



Religious and Devotional Indian Films: A Study of the Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

*Indian cinema began its journey with a religious film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) by Dadasaheb Phalke. This film narrated the story of Raja Harishchandra, who was known for speaking the truth even at the expense of losing one's wealth, fortune, and family. The trials and tribulations he encountered, do not deter him from following his path of truth and honesty. Later, Dadasaheb Phalke and other filmmakers made several films on religious themes. Another genre that became popular was the Devotional cinema. Devotional films, during the colonial period, were made on saints like Tulsidas, Surdas, Meera, Chandidas, Tukaram, and Kabir. They portray the interface between the past and the present. The emphasis on Swadeshi films by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and other leaders during the colonial period was an issue that related to the portrayal of nationalist and ethical values in religious and devotional cinema. But the colonial censorship machinery was ready to throttle nationalist aspirations with its full might. Group viewings of religious films were open to the women so that they could participate in the bhakti experience leading to increased women's visibility in public life. In the 1980s and 1990s, the T.V. series *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* became extremely popular and created milestones in their viewership and impact.*

Keywords: *Religious cinema, Devotional films, Nationalist, Colonial, Saints*

Indian cinema began its journey with a religious film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) by Dadasaheb Phalke. This film narrates the story of Raja Harishchandra, who was known for speaking the truth even at the expense of losing one's wealth, fortune, and family. The trials and tribulations he encountered, do not deter him from following his path of truth and honesty. Later, Dadasaheb Phalke and other filmmakers made several films on religious themes. Another genre that became popular was the Devotional cinema. Devotional films, during the colonial period, were made on saints like Tulsidas, Surdas, Chandidas, Tukaram, and Kabir. Beginning with religious films was a safe bet since viewers could relate to the topics and find comfort in the films' religious tone. Often based on narratives in ancient epics and sacred texts, these films explored legendary figures and events from long ago. They portray the interface between the past and the present. This is likely implied by the fact that these past accounts are being told in a media that is both contemporary and technologically advanced, such as film. The emphasis on Swadeshi films by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and other leaders during the colonial period was an issue that related to the portrayal of nationalist and ethical values in religious and devotional cinema.

There was an enduring and profound respect for the celestial beings. Illiterate viewers bowed down in worship, believing the onscreen deities to be real, as they brought the icy pages of epics and scriptures to life on screen and performed marvels.¹ The truth about God also applied to God's creation, the human race. Saints and devotees from the later days, such as Tulsidas, Surdas, Kabir, Gyaneshwar, Tukaram, etc. had an impact on the landscape of the nation. Not only did these holy men and women possess the ability to perform miracles, but their lives and teachings were greatly



revered and had a significant impact on the public. Awe and respect were felt by the audiences during these religious and devotional performances.ⁱⁱ In the 1980s and 1990s, viewers would grovel before the stars of epic TV series like Ramayana and Mahabharata as if they were divinities. There were a few attempts to weave patriotism into a religious or historical topic or to have a figure play the role of a nationalist leader, but such attempts were always excised.ⁱⁱⁱ The colonial censorship machinery was ready to throttle nationalist aspirations with its full might.

The religious traditions and dedication of the typical Indian make religious topics more popular says Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, and these themes also have wider appeal since the pertinent episodes are recognized and appreciated by people throughout India.^{iv} *Gopal Krishna* (1938) by Prabhat Studios, directed by Fateh Lal and Damle, successfully captured the essence of rural India. The film's trick shots and crowd scenes contributed to its immense popularity. As anti-imperialism grew, even religious legends were seen as symbols of resistance to oppression. For example, when depicted on screen, the story of Krishna, the cowherd, and his fight against the tyrant Kansa would inevitably evoke a sense of patriotism and rebellion among viewers.^v Therefore, it is possible that Lord Krishna was alluding to colonial persecution and misrule when speaking of his maternal Uncle Kansa's poor judgment and leadership, oppression, and tyranny. When working under the constraints of colonial censorship, filmmakers turned to metaphor and allegory.

Also unanticipated was the effect of religious films' widespread appeal. Indian middle-class women seldom had the freedom to travel and engage in social activities. Men were the primary audience for the first wave of foreign films. The impact of these foreign films was deemed inappropriate for these women. Public showings of early religious films, such as *Raja Harishchandra*, were met with widespread approbation from the elders. Group viewings of religious films were open to the women so that they could participate in the bhakti experience. Tensions rose at home as a result of the news 'topical' that accompanied these bhakti films, which depicted leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC) urging women to join the independence struggle. However, societal norms began to soften as prominent INC women like Sister Nivedita, Annie Besant, and Sarojini Naidu spoke out publicly as allies of the women's liberation movement. As a result of the Bhakti films' emphasis on humanism, women's visibility in public life was on the rise.^{vi} Consequently, humanist and reformist ideals were prominent in religious and devotional writings, which helped disseminate the notions of the independence movement.

Marc Ferro argued that films were seen mainly as artistic creations for a long time, and people focused on praising and evaluating them as art.^{vii} To understand the connection between films and history, we have to focus on the different roles of film, the film's role in history and society, and the film as a historical source. In Ferro's words, films are not only the product of time but also agents of history. Cinema is a representative of society and also acts as an agent of change in society. Sumita S. Chakravarty also shared the same view and emphasized that cinematic culture can thus be seen as a mediated form of national consciousness.^{viii} Pierre Sorlin pointed out the importance of cinema as a source of history. According to him, it was not the deliberate choice of historians to incorporate audiovisual material in the process of history-writing, if historians today neglect them, it will exist despite them as a history through pictures.^{ix}

Rachel Dwyer focused on the role of cinema in keeping religion a debatable topic in public. She made the case that, unlike state-owned media, privately controlled film (like in India) upholds religion in the front and center of popular culture.^x In her analysis of Indian cinema, she sought to deconstruct how the media shaped religious rituals.^{xi} Films are deeply influenced by the socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions of their times. However, they do not merely reflect these influences; they also play a pivotal role in shaping and gradually constructing cultural identities within society.^{xii} Films that are not religious but devotional demonstrate the individual's

spirituality, virtue, fate, and the result of karma, which ultimately relate to the devotional idea. Dwyer focused on how viewers from diverse social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds approach different cinema genres in unique ways.^{xiii} Not every religious film has to be appealing to every segment of the population, but religious films like *Krishna Janam* had a special attraction for the uneducated and appealed to Hindus of all classes throughout the country.^{xiv}

From 1920 to 1924, Indian Cinema was riding the crest of a *bhakti* wave of its creation led by Dada Saheb Phalke and joined by other equally interested persons. Indian cinema began to unfold its culture and continuing spiritual tradition to create a new national ethos.^{xv} The first forms of Indian cinema were religious films, which drew heavily on the vast canon of Hindu religious texts to tell stories of heroes, goddesses, and gods.^{xvi} In the initial years of cinema production in Bombay City and province, religious films were the favourite subject of newly emerged film companies. To captivate the millions of Indians, the gods Ram, Krishna, Hanuman, and others emerged from the icy pages of epics in a fresh visual mode, but they were soundless.^{xvii}

The Bhakti movement in its known form preached Divine Unity; in cinema, it was harnessed to foster the ideal of one Indian nation or Indian nationhood.^{xviii} Gautam Kaul finds the relationship between the devotional films made in 1919, *Bhakti Surdas* and *Kabir Kamal*, with the commitment of Mahatma Gandhi, who became the President of the Belgaum session of the Indian National Congress, to social improvement and reform in Hindu society. He also emphasized that proper credit has not been given to the contribution of religious films. One of the main reasons why the screen became such a popular form of entertainment was because of religious films. Curiosity and an enduring fascination with religion and folklore likely had a larger role than modernity in attracting conservative Indians to the innovative medium of film.^{xix} Pranjali Bandhu argued that religious cinema was a popular genre in almost all the national language cinemas. No other country has made as many religious films, as consistently, over such a long period, as India.^{xx} Legends and themes from the epics have had and will have a lasting impact on Hindi and other language films.^{xxi} Pranjali Bandhu also emphasized the importance of religious themes and considered theatre as the fifth Veda, the mass media by which the Vedic works are transferred to the illiterates.^{xxii} The uneducated viewers bowed down in worship, believing the virtual deities to be genuine, whenever they materialized on television as living, breathing beings plucked from the frigid pages of ancient texts and dramas.^{xxiii} Talking about the religious films in the colonial period, Pranjali Bandhu argued that they were used for patriotic purposes as a veiled form by many playwrights, particularly from Bengal and Maharashtra.^{xxiv}

B.V. Dharap traced the making of religious films and argued that religious films are produced by planning rather than by accident. Dada Saheb Phalke was anxious to select a subject with the largest mass appeal.^{xxv} Phalke's religious cinema enjoyed immense popularity not only in Bombay but also in other urban centres of India.^{xxvi} Although there were differences in language, customs, culture, and costumes of audiences, they were united by their shared deep beliefs in religion. Pranjali Bandhu analyzed the film movement in Tamil Nadu in the 1930s and the 40s and argued that this movement derived much of its inspiration from the nationalist movement and was linked with it. Leaders in national movements also employed cinema as a weapon in the fight for national freedom. S. Satyamurthy was a leader who mobilized the cinema and stage artists for the national cause, and when Tamil language films emerged in 1931, S. Satyamurthy recognized the potential of Cinema as an instrument of change.^{xxvii} The emphasis of devotional films on the lives of reformist saints who advocated reforms within the Hindu religion was seen to be in tune with social and religious reforms advocated by nationalist political leaders and social reformers in the areas of child marriage, alcoholism, dowry, widow remarriage, the caste system, etc.

In the context of religious and devotional films Professor Devendra Sharma^{xxviii} shared his thoughts: *The films of the 1930s were based on religious themes such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Shakuntala. These films focused on issues such as devotion, religiosity, and social reform such as denouncing alcoholism, widow remarriage, and removal of child marriage. Influenced by theatre, these films conveyed moral and social messages. They played an important role in cultural preservation and social change, which proved useful for nation-building.*^{xxix}

Since the beginning, Indian nationalism has been closely entwined with religion, and while its religious nationalism has been studied in other media such as literature and chromolithography, it is hardly studied in cinema.^{xxx} The saints were highly respected, and their life stories and teachings had an enormous effect on the lives of the general public. A similar trend of taking the lives of saints as film material is to be found in Bengal and Maharashtra.^{xxxi} Dada Saheb Phalke made *Raja Harishchandra* in Bombay but later shifted to Nasik and made all his later films in Nasik. As a perpetual reminder of the colonial presence, the British military outpost of Deolali stood between Trimbakeshwar and Nasik. Consequently, this location was significant for religious reasons, as well as for colonialism and Nationalist Swadeshi.^{xxxii} Trimbakeshwar and Nasik are both places of worship. While Nasik contains Panchvati, where Lord Ram, Sita, and Laxman resided during their exile, Trimbakeshwar is known for being the birthplace of Godavari and one of Shiva's Jyotirlinga. Religious films caught the attention of even the leaders of the Indian national movement. The first leader who became interested in Cinema was Bal Gangadhar Tilak. In 1913, Tilak's newspaper *Kesari* mentioned Phalke's first film, *Raja Harishchandra*, as an entirely Indian production by Indians.^{xxxiii}

Influence of Religious and Devotional Films

Even if there may be a distinction of influence among classes, movies have a profound moral impact on all of them. Film effects may be seen in ways they shape value patterns, real behavior, and views on life.^{xxxiv} The ideals necessary for societal renewal were portrayed in the religious film. The tenets of Satyagraha, as shown in the life of Raja Harishchandra, are similar: one must bear evil's consequences in the hope that virtue will triumph in the end.^{xxxv} It is also being argued that people's behaviour and lives are impacted by devotional and religious films. The common people had the chance to experience their spiritual leanings as gods and goddesses came to life in movies. The people stand in long queues outside temples and cinema halls.^{xxxvi} Throughout the country, events from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, and those of saints and devotees were the same. These were told and re-told from generation to generation.^{xxxvii} Religious and devotional films were famous during the silent era, and when sound came to India in 1931, religious films were revived in a big way.^{xxxviii} The sound as a tool of Cinema became more effective in influencing the masses. They grew more attached to religious hymns through the sound, which made them more deeply connected to the films. The divine presence was shown in Indian cinema, which envisioned an ideal world where individuals, families, and society worked together.^{xxxix} The general public was interested in the exceptional actions that gods and demigods in legendary movies executed. When T.V. Parvate interviewed Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan for the January 1945 issue of *Filmindia* magazine, he explained the script for Baburao Patel's film *Draupadi* (1944) and raised significant questions about how the general public should interpret religious figures. "The demigods and super characters should be revered, but one should not try to emulate them," Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan responded. Using Raja Harishchandra, Lord Rama, and Dharmaraja Yudhister as examples, he highlighted their ethical honesty and strong sense of public duty.^{xl}

The goal of the devotional films based on the lives of great saints was to instill idealistic thinking in the general public. The fusion of Eknath's idealism is in the seeking of equality between



castes without upsetting the authority of tradition.^{xli} The film *Sant Tukaram* is devoted to social problems and represents the complete and comprehensive union of faith and social activity.^{xlii} The lowest classes of society enjoyed this film, which was highly well-liked by the general public. K. Ahmad Abbas wrote in April 1939, "Pity the Poor Film Critic," in the *Filmindia* magazine, that "we still remember how five years ago a film, which was opened by the Viceroy in Delhi and the Governor in each provincial capital, utterly failed to appeal to the public. *Sant Tukaram* created a world record without any certificate. Not the bureaucrats or plutocrats but the mill - workers of Bombay helped it to run for a year".^{xliii} The screens carried the uplifting message of *Sant Tukaram* to millions all over the country.^{xliv} The common people's religious practices have also been altered by the famous devotional films. One of the most popular films of the 1970s was *Jai Santoshi Maa*, which was released in 1975. Though the film takes place in a fictional north Indian village in the modern era, *Santoshi Maa*'s cult has grown strong in urban areas, especially among lower middle-class women. This vrata is relatively easy for them - they have to avoid eating sour foods, and they don't even have to worry about any middlemen.^{xlv}

Filmmaker Sunil Darshan^{xlvi} discussed the influence of religious and devotional films, particularly those with religious themes. He considered *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975) to be the last important religious film, saying that the genre declined after that. Acknowledging that subjects such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were more effective on television, he recognized the success of animated films but noted the lack of deep cultural impact of live-action religious films. Darshan described such films as important in shaping social consciousness and values, although he felt this was lacking in contemporary films.^{xlvii}

The Bhakti saints likewise advocated this idealistic position of cutting out the middlemen and high costs to have a direct relationship with God without much bother. Also, the songs from the film *Arti* are frequently included in religious ceremonies. The telecast of the religious genre in the 1990s had a tremendous impact and appeal among India's general public. The general public highly favors the 1987 and 1988 releases of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* television series. Sujala Singh emphasized how the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are incorporated into Indians' daily routines. She maintained that the general people do not understand the Vedas and Upanishads because of the inaccessible Sanskrit language, but that the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are taught through diverse methods whether it be through the Ram-Lila performances, comic-book depiction of epics for children, or, through the connecting medium of films where epics are woven into the fabric of the quotidian in ways so various as to advocate not merely an abstract Hinduism, but an entire way of life.^{xlviii}

Prem Sagar^{xlix} highlighted the importance of devotional and religious cinema. He identified the roots of nationalistic and ethical values in religious and devotional Hindi cinema to Raja Harishchandra (1913) and argued that the early films effectively highlighted issues such as social change and unity in diversity. He emphasized the universality of "Sanatan" values and the stories of *Ramayana* as symbols of inclusiveness and morality. Sagar expressed concern over the weakening of these themes in films after the year 2000 and the inclination of cinema toward glamour and commercialization. He described multiplex culture as limiting the reach of cinema and discussed the effects of technological advancement on social behavior.¹

Thus, the rising national consciousness was reflected in the early religious and devotional films' appeal, despite their potentially artistically primitive nature. The religious films exhibited the principles that society needs to revitalize itself. Struggling for freedom in the face of brutal oppression by colonial rulers demanded not only bravery but also a devotion to serving others without expecting anything in return. Factors contributing to the genre's appeal include familiarity with religious narratives; religious devotion to gods, goddesses, and saints; confidence in divinity to



perform miracles; and providing answers to life's difficulties. Also, producers were afraid of losing money as the imperialist government's stringent censorship standards for films with a socio-political tone prohibited filmmakers from exploring issues other than religion. The focus on Swadeshi films during the colonial period was an idea that related to nationalist and ethical values being portrayed in religious and devotional films.

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- ^{xxviii} Dr. Sharma, Devendra, is a Professor of Communication at California State University, USA. He is also a fifth-generation performer, writer, and director.
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- xlvi Suneel Darshan is an Indian filmmaker, producer, and director.
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- xlix Prem Sagar is a renowned cinematographer and the author of the book *An Epic Life: Ramanand Sagar, From Barsaat to Ramayan*. He is the son of Ramanand Sagar, the director of the well-known serial *Ramayana*.
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