



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

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 *prasad* 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 *prasad* they have received. "*Gur-chana*—you call that *prasad*?" 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.

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 *prasad* 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.

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.



Santoshi Ma rescues Birju in response to Satyavati's prayer.

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 vermillion 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 savor his budding love affair.



Birju and Geeta in love.

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 mustache 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 dramatized 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-cana* 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 *vrata*, and finally verbalizes her request: that her husband not forget her.



Santoshi Ma appears to Satyavati as an old woman.

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, harboring 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 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, 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.



The assembled gods and Narada salute Santoshi Ma.

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>1</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 materialize, along with Ganesh, to form a tableau: Santoshi Ma in the center, 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.”

### Getting “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 realization 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 a “goal-driven, instrumentalized” subaltern hero, a working class “angry young man” (Jain 2001:216-221). 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 exposes 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 nationalized 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 mobilized

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<sup>1</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 liason 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.

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 laborers, artisans, and merchants.

Rather than categorize *Jai Santoshi Maa* as an anomalously-successful mythological in a year of violent “mobilization” 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 *vrat-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.



Birju and Satyavati as blissful newlyweds.

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).

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, depersonalized agency favored 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* 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.”



Santoshi Ma: the Mother as divine Grandmother.

In a further theo-visual argument, the film proposes that not only is Santoshi Ma available to all women through her *vrata* 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 mobilizing message that it is reasonable for every woman to expect, within that cycle, her own measure of "satisfaction" in the form of love, comfort, and respect.