# The Mythological Film and its Framework of Meaning: An Analysis of *Jai Santoshi Ma*

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W ITH THE unprecedented success of *Jai Santoshi Ma,* a glossy Bombay film which continues to play to full houses, a little-known goddess has become the centre of a new cult in many urban centres. This paper seeks to explore the cultural grammar within which the story of Santoshi Ma was created and speculates about the nature of social groups and categories within which this goddess has elicited such an enthusiastic response.

### The Story

For those readers who have not seen the film, the story is briefly related here. The scope of this paper does not allow me to show the fine details which are woven into the tapestry of the film. Only its broad strokes can be analyzed.

The significant events shown in the film are as follows. The lord Ganesh creates a daughter called Santoshi at the request of his sons. When the girl grows up, she finds many devotees on earth. Among her devotees is Satyawati, the daughter of a Brahman priest, who falls in love with a poet and singer called Birju. She prays to Santoshi Ma in order to obtain Birju as her husband, and promises that she will visit all the shrines of the goddess if her wish is granted.

Birju comes from a family of farmers. He is not himself inclined towards the dull routine of agricultural tasks, but his six elder brothers are all married and work on their land assiduously. Apart from the eldest brother, who has some appreciation of Birju's artistic nature, the brothers and their wives resent him for his laziness.

A wedding is arranged between Birju and Satyawati. After the wedding, Satyawati fulfils her vow to the goddess and visits all her shrines. The fame of Santoshi Ma spreads. The three great gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, come in the garb of ascetics to receive the

*prasada* of jaggery and roast chick-peas *(gur* and *chana)* offered to Santoshi Ma, at Satyawati's doorstep.

This act of the three gods enrages their wives Brahmani, Lakshmi and Parvati; they vow to punish Satyawati if she persists in her devotion to Santoshi Ma. They appear to her in a dream and warn her of dire consequences if she continues to worship Santoshi Ma. Satyawati, however, is steadfast in her devotion. This leads to a great conflict between the principles of *shakti*, represented by the three goddesses, and *sati*, represented by Satyawati.

As their first jealous move the goddesses succeed in separating Birju and Satyawati. Satyawati discovers that her husband is being fed the left-overs *(jutha)* of his brothers. Enraged at this insult Birju leaves home and vows to come back only after he has become rich. He goes on a voyage by ship but a terrible storm is caused by the three goddesses. Birju is saved, however, by Santoshi Ma. He finds employment with a rich merchant and is soon a wealthy man himself.

Meanwhile, the three goddesses appear as village girls and tell Satyawati that her husband is dead. She refuses to believe them but Birju's brothers and their wives find no reason to doubt this. They begin to mistreat her. Soon, the onerous tasks of the household are passed on to her. In return, all she is given is bread made from cattle-fodder and water in a coconut shell. Santoshi Ma appears once to lighten her housework.

Although Birju has become rich, the three goddesses have caused him to forget Satyawati. He is now in love with Geeta, the daughter of the rich merchant.

Satyawati's misfortunes continue. Once, while cutting wood in the forest, she is pursued by the local 'tough'. Santoshi Ma again comes to her rescue. Her trident becomes a snake and kills the man. Satyawati, however, is so demoralized that she decides to kill herself. At this stage the sage Narada appears to her and suggests that she should perform *vrata* (fasting) on twelve consecutive Fridays and worship Santoshi Ma at her temple with the appropriate offerings of jaggery and roast chick-peas.

For eleven consecutive Fridays, Satyawati keeps the fast and makes the prescribed offerings at Santoshi Ma's temple. The 'defeat' of the three goddesses seems imminent. On the twelfth Friday, however, she is unable to secure the jaggery and the roast chick-peas. She prays to Santoshi Ma, who appears as an old woman and gives her the *gur* and *chana*. Now the three goddesses cause the forest around Satyawati to burst into flame but because of her true devotion to Santoshi Ma, the fire fails to burn her. She completes her vow of keeping the fasts and prays to Santoshi Ma to bring her husband back.

At that very moment, a voice is heard in the merchant's house urging Birju to go back to Satyawati. As a signature of her presence, Santoshi Ma leaves her footprints in the merchant's house. Birju rushes back laden with riches. He is shocked to see how his wife has been mistreated and decides to set up a separate household.

When they have built their own house, Satyawati decides to have an image of Santoshi Ma established in her home. As a gesture of forgiveness, she invites Birju's brothers and sisters-in-law to the ceremony. But the three goddesses work on the vile nature of two of her sisters-in-law: during the *puja*, they add lemon juice to the milk that has been offered to Santoshi Ma. Sour tastes are taboo in the worship of Santoshi Ma and she is so angered by this act that she causes all the children who are present to die. Satyawati now stands accused of poisoning the children. She prays to Santoshi Ma; it is not only Satyawati but the entire relationship of devotee and deity that will be tarnished by the accusation. Overcoming her anger, the goddess appears in person, declares herself pleased by the devotion of Satyawati and restores the children to life.

In heaven, the three goddesses reveal that they were only putting Satyawati to the test. They bless Santoshi Ma and pray that her worship may be established throughout the world.

## The Analysis

*Jai Santoshi Ma* tells a story which is at once new and at once understood. By this statement I mean that it uses a grammar for communication which is well-rooted in Hindu culture, but is not a copy or repetition of earlier myths about mother goddesses. On the contrary, it seems to be a myth that is, perhaps, particularly suited to our times. In order to see this it is necessary to examine briefly, the prevalent mother goddess cults and to see where Santoshi Ma fits into this scheme.

It is not possible within the scope of this paper to provide all the necessary qualifications to the assertions about mother goddess cults made here, but we could construct a typology of the relations between human devotees and the cosmic entities. (See Table overleaf.)

The classification of cosmic entities in the Table is by no means exhaustive and can be subjected to many qualifications. It excludes, for instance, the relations between the deities of the Tantric cults and their devotees. However, since the Tantric cults are based on principles of reversal, I may be forgiven for concentrating on the *normal* for the purposes of this paper.

If we look at our classification, we see that the cosmic entities included in the first row are primarily those that one seeks to keep at bay through the observation of various taboos. It is necessary to point out that as we move in our classification from the first row to the second, we do not proceed by dropping the earlier relation but by including it in the latter

| Dominant element of ritual | Nature of contact between cosmic entities and human beings | Examples of corresponding cosmic entities |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Taboos and negative injunctions | Highly dangerous and preferably avoided | Varieties of female and male ghosts; bahari matas (the mother goddesses of the outside) |
| 2. Exorcism and expiation | Dangerous but periodically unavoidable | The preta (ghost) form of the dead man; ancestors; mother goddesses of disease such as Shitala mata |
| 3. Sacrifice represented by destruction of a victim | Simultaneously dangerous and benevolent contact | Goddesses who receive blood-sacrifice such as Durga and Kali, or in whose worship a sacrificial beast may be represented by a vegetable, such as a marrow, which is cut asunder; local goddesses to whom blood-sacrifices are made, such as the goddess Ugra in Tamil Nadu |
| 4. Sacrifice represented by the sufferings of a mythic person treated as a historical being— the sacrifice being in the nature of once-and-for-all in its soteriological power | Benevolent and distant | Parvati in her Gouri form, whose suffering and asceticism procured for her a husband like Shiva, and whose worship holds similar rewards for her devotees |
| 5. Regular propitiation through offerings | Benevolent, but distant contact | All goddesses who have regular temples and a daily worship, normally mediated through a priest. The goddesses here usually appear with their husbands |
| 6. Transcendence of all formal rules through devotion (bhakti) | Benevolent, intimate contact | Normally male gods, but also female goddesses who have similar relations of bhakti with a god (such as Radha) |

one. Thus, the negative injunctions of the first row are incorporated as an element of *all* rituals and, indeed, as anthropologists have been at pains to suggest, no social relation is possible without an element of taboo. What we wish to stress here however, is that there is a category

of cosmic entities with whom the only relationship is that of avoidance, with no positive obligations at either the human or the cosmic plane.

Man would willingly forget that the universe is inhabited not only by benevolent sacred forces but also by evil and malevolent ones. Yet an encounter with evil cannot be avoided forever, and the inevitability of this encounter is brought out in the death rituals of the Hindus. It is part of Hindu beliefs that on death a man takes on the form of a *preta* (ghost) and it is the primary task of ritual to convert this dangerous, liminal category into the incorporated category of the ancestor. The encounter with virulent disease is also modelled on this pattern and in relation to the deities of death and disease, the dominant elements of ritual are those of exorcism and expiation. For example, smallpox is a disease which is associated with the goddess Shitala, whose visitation may be seen both as punishment and as grace, for the victim is believed to be possessed by this temperamental goddess. Along with a number of taboos, the rituals performed for the cure of the smallpox victim have the major theme of exorcism of the goddess through expiation. In these cases a contact between the sacred is seen to have taken place but it is a violent, dangerous contact, from which man has to be carefully brought back to the world of the living and to a state of well-being.

The third row deals with those mother goddesses who require periodic propitiation through the sacrifice of a victim. The theme of *shakti* or 'power' of the goddess is explicit here. In many of the myths relating to these mother goddesses, the world is seen as threatened by demons. The gods are helpless and must evoke the goddess in her *shakti* form to ward off demonic powers. It is important to note that the goddess in her pure, gentle form, such as that of Lakshmi or Parvati, is unable to meet the threat of demons. It is when she takes on a dark, ferocious form such as that of Kali, that she can annihilate the demonic powers. Thus the *shakti* form of the goddess is most suited for the killing of specific demons such as Mahishasura or Raktabija. In killing Raktabija, for instance, the myth states that thousands of ferocious, bloodthirsty goddesses had to be created to drink up every drop of the demon's blood as it fell, for Raktabija had a boon that every drop of his blood would grow into a new Raktabija.

At the local level, a village woman may turn into a ferocious goddess, as is shown by various village myths of South India related by Whitehead.[1] One such story is that of a Brahman woman who is tricked into marrying a Shudra man. When she discovers this trickery, she is so enraged that she kills herself and takes the form of a ferocious goddess. She can only be appeased by the sacrifice of her husband. In the annual blood-sacrifice offered to her (and other goddesses of her kind), the beast is seen as a symbolic substitute for the husband. Under the influence of Sanskritization, the beast may itself be substituted by a vegetable such as a gourd, but the killing is still symbolically

represented by cutting this vegetable asunder.

It is to be noted that in her *shakti* form, whether at the local or the all-India level, the goddess usually stands alone and is not encompassed within a higher male principle.[2] For example, the gentle Parvati appears with Shiva, in a position that shows her femininity to be encompassed in the male principle and subordinate to it. On the other hand, in her more powerful aspect, she stands alone, as the iconographic representations of the goddess Durga show, or she stands ascendent over her husband, as in the case of the fearsome goddess Kali. This aspect of the goddesses in their *shakti* form is important and may be considered as a constituent of their power. This needs to be contrasted with the other aspect of femininity, namely, that of the principle of *sati*, in which the woman is represented as subordinated to the husband.

The principle of power finds expression in the goddesses who represent *shakti*, who come to the aid of man and the gods in periods of cosmic darkness by killing the demons who threaten the entire cosmic order. The principle of renunciation, on the other hand, finds expression in the ideals of *sati*. At the mythological level, this principle finds an explicit recognition in the asceticism performed by Parvati in order to get Shiva as a husband.

The power of renunciation is well recognized in Hindu myths. It often pits man against the gods and forces the latter to concede to the demands of men. However, the *tapa* (asceticism) of a woman is always *for* her husband, while the asceticism of a man takes him towards his own personal goals. For example, Parvati's asceticism was performed to win for herself a good husband; Savitri's steadfast devotion to her husband defeated Yama, the god of death. Since Sati and Savitri are often held up as examples of the ideals of Indian womanhood, it is important to remember that the cults built around these women emphasize the once-and-for-all nature of their sacrifice. Because Parvati in her Gouri form performed severe asceticism to obtain Shiva, other young women need not perform such ascetic feats. They need only commemorate the asceticism of Gouri through a symbolic *vrata* (fast) in order to duplicate her achievement and obtain husbands like Shiva. In some senses, the sacrifice represented by the destruction of a victim at the altar of *shakti* is distinct from the sacrifice of a *sati*, for the latter takes on the role of the victim herself and suffers on behalf of all mankind. Needless to say, the male-female relations, as shown earlier, are clustered around two opposite poles in the case of both *shakti* and *sati*.

Referring back to our typology of deities, the fifth row deals with those deities who are regularly propitiated for general well-being. The offerings to these deities are not constituted through the shedding of any sacrificial blood, or by the destruction of a victim. While the *shakti* goddess absorbs the evil of society that finds condensed and concrete expression in the victim, by contrast, the *sati* goddess suffers on behalf

of all mankind. The gods and goddesses in row five preside over the normal well-being of society. They are benevolent and distant deities but we must remember that they are able to take this benevolent form because the states of ill-being have been collectively dealt with through the medium of the deities in the earlier categories.

Finally, we move to row six, where the deity has become an intimate friend. Historically, this conception of the deity owes much to the Bhakti cults. From our point of view, it is only necessary to point out that this is the only relation, outside of Tantric rituals, in which taboos may be violated. For example, Rama was fed contaminated (*jutha*) berries by Shabri. Radha stood with her foot on Krishna's chest. Poets like Bihari could compose verses that cajoled Krishna for his lowly birth in friendly, bantering tones. Such a relationship is simply not possible with a goddess like Shitala (although, due to the influence of Tantric cults, such intimacy is sometimes possible with the goddesses Durga or Kali in some regions in India).

It should be obvious that it is not only the well-being of society but also its ill-being that is sought to be given a collective representation through its conception of the cosmic order. Let us now look at the story of Santoshi Ma and see where she fits into the categories of deities mentioned above.

## The Defining Features of Santoshi Ma

It seems to me that in an important sense one may justifiably ask whether the true subject of this story is not Santoshi Ma, but Satyawati. Is the emphasis on the creation of a new deity, or on the rejuvenation of the world through the sacrifices of another *sati*? In any case, it is possible to see that Satyawati's story corresponds to the order of events and the story of Santoshi Ma to the order of structure. Every significant chain of events relating to Satyawati points to a successive movement in the evolution of Santoshi Ma, such that moving from the possibility of being defined as a malevolent, punishing goddess, Santoshi Ma slowly emerges as an intimate, benevolent goddess. However, the story requires not only that we understand who Santoshi Ma *is*, but also who she *is not*.

In the story of Satyawati, the first significant event is her votive offering to Santoshi Ma that she will visit all the shrines of the goddess if she can procure Birju as her husband. The goddess grants her desire and Satyawati, in turn, fulfils her obligations by visiting the various shrines. Now, it is important to note that had Satyawati failed to fulfil her vow, she would have invited the wrath of Santoshi Ma and the rest of the story may well have been a story of expiation. Many of the myths related on the occasion of women's fasts deal, simply, with such a theme of expiation in relation to a deity. Since the votive offerings are fulfilled and this possibility becomes dormant, we are taken to the next

significant event in the narrative: Santoshi Ma's success arouses the jealousy of the three goddesses. While Satyawati is shown to be steadfast in her devotion to her husband, the three goddesses defy the request made by their husbands to admit Santoshi Ma into the cosmic pantheon. The events that follow, as one of the jealous goddesses herself says, represent the struggle between the principles of *shakti* and *sati*. In this very formulation, it becomes clear that Santoshi Ma does *not* desire worship in a *shakti* form. In other words, Santoshi Ma is not shown to be fighting any demons. She does not require the destruction of a victim. Rather, she requires the suffering of a single devotee who can suffer on behalf of all her devotees.

Satyawati's sufferings begin when she is separated from her husband. It is significant that what enrages Birju is the breaking of an important food taboo. He discovers that he is being fed the *jutha* food of the household and is thus being treated no better than a dog. At one level their separation is unfortunate for Satyawati; at another level it lifts a veil from the relations which Birju's brothers' wives have with him. This part of the story relates to the sufferings undergone by Satyawati in her conjugal home. She is helped sometimes by the personal intervention of the goddess but her sacrifice in the form of her trials is important, for it provides the test of her devotion to Santoshi Ma. At this point the narrative seems to pose the question: Is she capable of the kind of devotion that can defy not only men, but also the gods?

At this juncture it may be useful to restate and amplify the significance of a *sati*. As I said earlier, Hindu myths often represent the conflict between Indra, the king of gods, and human ascetics. For our purpose it is necessary to point out that asceticism is seen as forcing the gods to come into a relationship with the ascetic and to grant him whatever boon he desires. If the acts of gods can be seen as acts emanating from forces over which man has no control (since they emanate from an authority that is higher than himself) then one may be justified in going along with Durkheim and saying that the gods here are no other than the personification of society itself. Importantly, it is precisely to guard against the vagaries of temperamental gods like Indra that Hindu myths bestow on man the powerful weapon of asceticism.

What happens to this theme when it is translated into the domain of women? As pointed out earlier, the asceticism of a woman is seen as lying in selfless devotion to her husband. The asceticism of woman as *sati* comes into conflict with another aspect of femininity—that of *shakti*, the powerful, ferocious, feminine, cosmic principle that *reverses* the normal relations between men and women, but is seen as necessary in the oscillation between the states of well-being and ill-being that societies undergo. This conflict is presented in stories such as that of Sati Anasuya and the goddess Manasa. In the film, however, it becomes the means of defining the cult of Santoshi Ma. Satyawati exhibits the devotion and

sacrifice which should be performed on behalf of the new goddess, who thus fits neatly into the category of a goddess who is propitiated by her devotees in commemoration of her sacrifice.

The signal for the next shift in the definition of the goddess comes with Narada's advice to Satyawati to perform *vrata* for twelve consecutive Fridays and to propitiate the goddess through the offering of jaggery and roast chick-peas. Again, her success in this is achieved with the help of the goddess, who now becomes established as a deity to be regularly propitiated on a clearly marked day (Friday), with a specific offering, in a temple in which she is permanently established.

The move from a temple outside the house is signalled in the story by Satyawati's decision to ceremonially install the goddess in her own home. The next development is when Satyawati's sisters-in-law cause an important food taboo relating to the goddess to be violated by adding lemon to the milk offered to her. This enrages the goddess and for the first time her anger turns against her devotee and she causes the children to die. Thus a possibility which had remained dormant behind the benevolent presence of the goddess now comes to the fore. It is characteristic of goddesses like Shitala that they first strike innocent people with disease, infertility and other calamities, and then win devotees through a demonstration of their power.

Till this point in the story, it was Satyawati whose devotion was being tested. Now, in a sense, it is the goddess who is put to the test. If her anger now turns against her own devotee then she would fall back into the category of a ferocious, powerful goddess who is to be feared and propitiated primarily through the observance of negative injunctions, but with whom the devotee cannot enter into an intimate and close relationship. Intimacy with a goddess (or a god) requires that the goddess should not only know how to punish the guilty but should also know how to forgive those who have inadvertently offended her. But in overcoming her anger and forgiving those who tried to implicate Satyawati by breaking a taboo, Santoshi Ma is finally established as a gentle, benevolent goddess who is intimately involved with her devotees.

Significantly, it is at this point in the film that Santoshi Ma first appears in person to those who have gathered to worship her. (Her earlier appearances to help the *bhakta* (devotee) were always in the guise of some mortal being. When Satyawati completes the twelve *vratas* (fasts), Santoshi Ma's voice is heard by Birju and he sees her footprints, but the goddess does not herself appear before him.) With her personal appearance at this stage, we may say that the goddess has been fully and finally defined in relation to human beings. Thus the syntagmatic succession of events in the film have a cumulative structure which culminates in the final form in which the goddess appears. One may say that the visible events at the human level define the characteristics of the invisible world of the gods. Does this invisible world corre-

spond to unarticulated forces that are felt by the individual as emana-
ting from outside himself—the forces of society and its unconscious
archetypes? Before we take this question for comment, it may be useful
to give a schematic representation of the argument so far. (See Diagram-
matic Representation.)

In the diagram (on page 53) the horizontal axis corresponds to the
succession of events in the story of Satyawati. The points on the
vertical axis OY, correspond to the establishment of the characteristics
of the goddess. We can see that for each point in the story of Satya-
wati, represented on the horizontal axis, there is a corresponding point
at OY that defines the characteristics of the goddess. But we should
also note that every point on OY has a corresponding point on OY'—the
negative axis on which we can see the possibilities of defining Santoshi
Ma that have been *rejected*. Thus the choice of every characteristic in
the definition of Santoshi Ma is built by rejecting the possibilities
which emerge as oppositions *in absentia*. In understanding the contem-
porary relevance of the myth, we must keep this in mind.

## The Formulation of a New Deity

At the beginning of this essay I said that the *Jai Santoshi Ma* story is
'at once new, and at once understood'. I have first tried to explicate
the code through which the events in the myth are understood and
'make sense'. I shall now deal with the other part of my initial state-
ment and try to show what is *new* in this myth.

For me, the story of Santoshi Ma hides important discontinuities in
the language of continuity. I can show this best by contrasting this
new goddess with a goddess like Shitala. Thanks to the excellent work
of anthropologists like Ralph Nicholas, and literary scholars like
Edward Dimock and Aditi Nath Sarkar,[3] we know that the worship of
Shitala was closely connected with the spread of smallpox as an
epidemic in Bengal. These scholars have shown us that Shitala rose
from a minor deity (who barely finds mention in the Puranic literature)
to occupy an important place in the Bengali pantheon, with a cult of
affliction and a theology of the repulsive. The myths and rites devoted to
Shitala clearly helped to transform the experience of smallpox as an
individual calamity to a collective one, and brought it within a frame-
work of meaning for the individual. What is interesting in the myths of
Shitala in Bengal, however, is that the ill-being of the community is
attributed to the specific experience of epidemics. The demon Jvarasur
(the demon of fever) is a clearly identified entity. Both the affliction
and healing, however, testify to the power of Shitala, who emerges as
a powerful goddess, who is to be regularly propitiated by sacrifice. The
victims of smallpox are represented as offerings to the goddess, but it is
hoped that the disease can be warded off by offering the destruction of
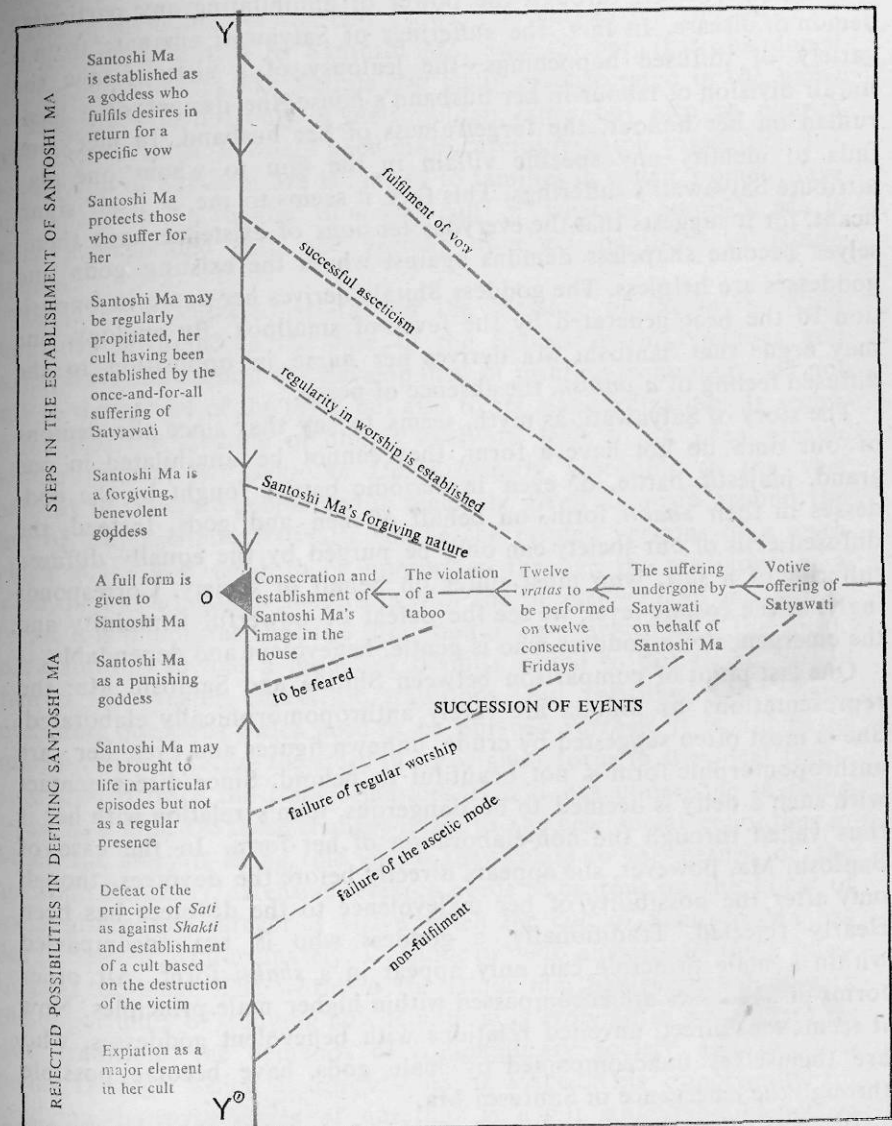
a beast, a symbolic substitute for the one who may be afflicted by the goddess.

In contrast to the specificity with which the source of ill-being is defined in the cult of Shitala as the demon of fever, Santoshi Ma does not establish herself through the power of annihilating any particular demon of disease. In fact, the sufferings of Satyawati emanate from a variety of diffused happenings—the jealousy of a sister-in-law, the unfair division of labour in her husband's house, the designs of a local ruffian on her honour, the forgetfulness of her husband. In fact, one fails to identify any specific villain in the film to whom one may attribute Satyawati's sufferings. This fact, it seems to me, is itself significant, for it suggests that the everyday tensions of existence have themselves become shapeless demons against whom the existing gods and goddesses are helpless. The goddess Shitala derives her name in opposition to the heat generated by the fever of smallpox. By analogy, one may argue that Santoshi Ma derives her name in opposition to the diffused feeling of *a antosh*, the absence of peace.

The story of Satyawati, as myth, seems to say that since the demons of our time do not have a form, they cannot be annihilated in one grand, majestic battle, or even in periodic battles fought by the goddesses in their *shakti* form, on behalf of men and gods. Instead, the diffused evils of our society can only be purged by the equally diffused suffering of a *sati*, who must suffer on behalf of society. Correspondingly, at the cosmic level, we see the defeat of powerful femininity and the emergence of a goddess who is gentle, benevolent and dependable.

One last point of comparison between Shitala and Santoshi Ma: the representations of Shitala are rarely anthropomorphically elaborated. She is most often suggested by crude, unhewn figures and even her rare anthropomorphic form is not beautiful to behold. Since direct contact with such a deity is deemed to be dangerous, man's relation with her is thus veiled through the non-elaboration of her form. In the case of Santoshi Ma, however, she appears directly before the devotees, though only after the possibility of her malevolence to the devotees has been clearly rejected. Traditionally, a goddess who is not encompassed within a male principle can only appear in a *shakti* form. All other forms of goddesses are encompassed within higher male principles. Now it seems that direct, unveiled relations with benevolent goddesses, who are themselves unaccompanied by male gods, have become possible through the emergence of Santoshi Ma.

It seems to me that the cult of Santoshi Ma is by its nature likely to find major acceptance in urban areas, where the 'demons' are shapeless and ubiquitous, and where the knowledge of traditional cults has declined. The worship of Santoshi Ma is simple. It is marked by the observance of a single taboo, namely, the avoidance of sour foods. The offerings do not require elaborate rituals of preparation and the media-

tion of a priest is not necessary. Although I have not conducted any systematic research on the cult of Santoshi Ma, I have found that the film provides a paradigm for the elements of this cult—votive offerings, performance of *vratas* for a specific period, and the instalment of the goddess in the home. As this cult grows, one notices the emergence of new temples dedicated to Santoshi Ma, and, further, that abandoned temples to goddesses like Shitala are being reconsecrated in the name of Santoshi Ma, not only in metropolitan cities but also in pilgrim cities like Varanasi. It would need more careful research to see whether the worship of Santoshi Ma is limited to families in which women have long abandoned a regular domestic cult or whether Santoshi Ma is being incorporated into the regular domestic pantheon of Hindu families.

We have concentrated so far on the message of the myth. What about the medium? In the case of the Shitala myth, Nicholas and Sarkar have shown how the development of printing technology led not only to the spread of the myth but also to its standardization. It seems to me that the medium of film is likely to lead to an even greater standardization: *Jai Santoshi Ma* is directly accessible to the vast majority of illiterate people and is regularly given a re-run around the time of major Hindu festivals. Unlike the printed versions of a myth which might still need to be interpreted through the mediation of a priest, film as a medium does away with the necessity of all mediation. To me it is important that the film should have delved into the local, folk traditions to find a model of divinity suited to our times, rather than to the greater, Sanskritic traditions. But the film raises many interesting questions which need to be pursued further. It would be of interest to try to locate the story in its original form in the local traditions and to trace the transformations that it has undergone in being recast as a film. Do these changes relate to the new social conditions in which the story is being told or do they relate to the nature of the medium? Similarly, extensive research needs to be done on the kinds of social groups and categories within which the cult of Santoshi Ma has been accepted. Unfortunately, I cannot provide answers to these questions at this stage. The world of the Hindi film has presented us with the opportunity of studying how Hinduism is evolving in relation to its own traditions, the demands of contemporary society, and the new media through which it spreads its message. This opportunity for studying the mythologies of our time is a gift which should not go unreciprocated.  □

## References

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2. See Lawrence A. Babb, *Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* (New York: Columbia University Press, n.d.).
3. For some of the research on the cult of Shitala in Bengal see Ralph Nicholas, 'The Village Mother in Bengal', manuscript; Ralph Nicholas and Aditi Nath Sarkar, '*Sitala* Mythology in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Bengal', in Marvin Davis, ed., *Bengal: Studies in Literature, Society and History* (Michigan State University, Asian Studies Centre Occasional Papers), South Asia Ser., no. 27 (1976).